THINGS
1985

1985 by byzinha

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Summary: It takes over a year before they can finally lure her out of her hiding place, and even so it wasn't because of their tireless attempts. / Series of oneshots about that 1985, focused on the children, lots of fluffy promised. / 1 of 3, followed by "we tell each other everything"

1. January

Author's note: Remember that time when I was like "I can't fanfic Stranger Things, the show is too smart for me"? LOL I miss that time.

Hello, howdy? I decided to fanfic Stranger Things.

I will let you know right away that this fic consists of **fluffy, friendship and young love** and I have NO INTENTIONS of like, having some dense, intrinsic, dark plot behind anything. It will be consisted of 12 oneshots about the everyday life of our beloved children, because they deserve some nice moments. I hope you're in the mood for some sugar.

Stranger Things and its characters are not mine at all, I'm not that creative.

An extra thanks for my friend Jen (littlecajunlady88) for beta reading this fic. I forced you to watch the show, and now we're both going down with it. Well.

1985

January

It takes over a year before they can finally lure her out of her hiding place, and even so it wasn't because of their tireless attempts. No, what brought her back and straight to Jim Hopper's house was as simple as biology can be.

Perhaps he wouldn't even notice that she was there, so quiet she was she could have gotten in and out without any alarm, but Hopper had a dog who was rather worried at the bathroom door, and when the sheriff of Hawkins went to check it out, he found bloody clothes on the floor and a scared and dirty girl in his tub.

"I'm hurt," she told him with teary eyes. Her voice cracked from lack of use, and she still talked quietly. It took him only one extra look around to know that he wouldn't be able to solve her problem.

"Hi, El," Jim said, blocking the door so the dog wouldn't come in sniffing everything. "Look, I'll call Joyce, okay? She can help you better."

Which was true, and practical. Luckily, Joyce was home that day and it was only a matter of minutes until she came to the rescue.

"Hi!" Joyce greeted sweetly, and there was something about the woman that always brought a sense of lull in Eleven, as if things would be okay eventually. "I'm so glad to see you again, look how much you've grown!"

Joyce sat by the tub near Eleven. She guessed she had changed, all right. She still was wearing Nancy's clothes, though they held a little tighter in a few places now, and her hair was certainly longer – last time she cut it was when she still was an experiment -, but that was about it. The woman turned on the hot water.

"Jim told me you said you are hurt, where are you hurt?" she asked, and Eleven hesitated a bit before relaxing her legs and holding her stomach under the turbid water.

"I'm bleeding," said the girl, and Joyce nodded as if it explained everything. "My stomach hurts."

"First of all, let's change this water, okay?" Joyce said, getting up and helping Eleven to her feet under the shower's warm water. "But I will let you know already, you will be alright."

She said that with a nice, sincere smile that even though there still was a pain in her belly, and she still was bleeding, Eleven believed her.

They emptied the tub and filled it again with hot water. Joyce told her that whenever she got like this, it was always good to have a hot shower, it eased the pain.

"Whenever?" echoed Eleven, and Joyce nodded. The bleeding would happen every month now, and the first months were tough, but she'd get used to it, like every woman does. It meant that she was turning into a woman now.

"And a rather beautiful one," added Joyce, washing Eleven's hair. The massage was one of the best things the girl felt her whole life.

"Beautiful," wondered El, looking up at the roof. Joyce hummed in response.

"You still have the same clothes Mike gave you," said Joyce, and at the mention of Mike's name the girl stiffened a bit. If Joyce noticed, she didn't say anything. "What do you think of calling Nancy tomorrow and all three of us go do some shopping for you? Maybe go to a hairdresser, get you a pretty haircut…" Eleven shook her head, and held on to her locks, which made Joyce chuckle. "Don't worry, no one is going to shave your head again, sweetheart, not if you don't want to. We just need to take a couple of inches here, so it can grow with some strength and it can shine."

"Hair can shine?" asked Eleven, clearly confused, and Joyce nodded again.

"It can," she assured. "Remember Nancy?" Eleven nodded. "She knows all kinds of tricks to make your hair look pretty. I don't know anything, I'm raising two boys, but she…" Joyce tickled El's waist, making the girl laugh. "Is a specialist."

They decided to set the shopping for the following day, and Hopper said that he'd pay for anything that Eleven would need. For that first day back though, Joyce brushed El's hair and gave her a hot bag to press on her stomach after she took a couple of painkillers; she explained what was going on and what were pads and tampons, and also a little bit of the implications that monthly bleed would have on the girl.

Joyce also said that since it was such a delicate time for Eleven and she had just gotten back, Jim should do everything the girl needed, which was actually El's favorite part. Joyce promised to come back the next morning.

"Do you want me to tell the boys that you're back?" she asked at last, proving that she actually noticed the girl's reaction whenever the boys were mentioned, and Eleven shook her head no. "No? Okay, I won't tell them yet. I'll see you tomorrow?"

And she did. The next day, Joyce and Nancy showed up early, and El was greeted with warm hugs and excited smiles.

"Are you feeling better?" asked Joyce, and Eleven nodded. They loaned her some clothes and then off they went downtown.

"Will you ever tell us what happened?" asked Nancy turning around on the passenger seat to look at El, who was in the back seat. The girl didn't answer. "We thought you were dead. Well, Mike thought you were trapped in the Upside-down, and spent *months* trying to figure out a way to bring you out, but the government closed all the breeches, so we wouldn't have much progress. We had to let it be, but it was hard, especially on him. You made quite the impression."

At first, they thought that Eleven wouldn't say anything about it, the girl only looked outside the window. And then-

"I missed the Snow Ball," she said. "Is Mike angry?"

Nancy chuckled.

"Mike? Angry at *you*?" She said as if it was the most absurd thing she'd ever heard. "El, that's not even possible."

At that, Eleven looked back at Nancy, big brown eyes genuinely surprised.

"But I broke the promise," Eleven said, her voice small in comparison of her eyes. "Twice."

"Hey, it's okay," Nancy reached and held El's hand comfortingly. "He knew you wouldn't be able to come, he was aware. Eleven, he's not angry. And he'll be so happy to know that you're back."

"They all will," Joyce added, looking at El through the rearview mirror.

"Besides," continued Nancy. "There's always the Spring Ball in May."

Eleven frowned, and it made Nancy chuckle again, as if she knew something that El didn't, which was probably the case.

They parked downtown and did all the shopping by foot. Even though Hopper had been nice enough to give a fair amount of money for Eleven, Joyce also used their time to teach the girl a thing or two about saving money. They bought a couple of dresses, some shirts, tops and jeans, two winter jackets, and then Nancy helped El choose some panties and bras.

After that, they went to the hairdresser, and even though Eleven was a bit scared of having all her hair cut off again, both Nancy and Joyce made sure to be very specific of what should be done, and cared to keep the girl distracted. The final result was simple waves loose on her shoulders. Nancy suggested some bangs covering El's forehead, and the rest of the hair was adorned with a red ribbon that matched the top she was wearing under the jeans jacket (that was actually Nancy's), and for once Eleven really liked the person she saw in the mirror, as if she was one step further from the person she used to be.

"Beautiful," she said enchanted, and behind her the hairdresser smiled.

"Beautiful indeed, young lady," he exclaimed, ushering her out of the chair.

They had lunch near there – burgers and fries, greasy the way El liked them – and then they went to the ice cream shop before they'd head home, three generations of women having fun together. It was maybe too cold to have ice cream, being the end of January and all, but a couple of scoops wouldn't hurt anyone.

"This is so different from my usual day with the boys," Joyce was commenting as they entered in the shop, plenty of bags in their hands. "This is *nice*," she looked at Eleven. "I hope you don't get tired of me, because I'd like to do this thing often."

Eleven smiled.

"Me too," she agreed, because it was true. Joyce was nice to her and taught her things she would never have figured out alone. And Eleven was eager to learn more.

Nancy chose her ice cream first and said that she'd take the bags to

the car and wait for the others outside, but she had barely left the shop when two bikes stopped in front of her.

"*Jesus Christ, Mike!*" She exclaimed jumping back, and then she immediately frowned thinking about who was inside the shop. Her brother and Lucas were there on their new bikes - they both had mowed lawns from spring to fall last year to afford the bicycles – and it still felt weird to look *up* at her little brother. He grew a good foot and a half the past months.

"I was looking for you," he said, ignoring her startled face. "Mom wants to know if you're going home for dinner."

"I am," she answered quickly, wanting him to *leave*.

"That's a hell lot of shopping you did," Lucas commented, eyebrows raised, and Nancy looked at the bags in her hand.

"They're not for me," she said. "They are for a friend."

"You're friends with Will's mom now?" asked Mike suspicious. "Because mom said you were going out *with her*."

"And I did. *I am*," Nancy answered, and then she realized that she didn't *need* to tell him anything. "Since when are you so *nosy*?"

"I'm your little brother, that's what I *do*," Mike replied, and Lucas laughed. His laugh was interrupted, though, when the door of the shop opened and he saw who was getting out.

There was a pause in time and the air stilled when Eleven looked at Lucas and then at Mike, her eyes going wide in her known 'what-the-hell-now' expression. Lucas's eyes went from El to Joyce, Nancy and then Mike, and he poked his friend's arm insistently, but Mike's eyes were on El and El only and there were a million emotions going on in them, so many that Eleven didn't know how to figure them out, and it even felt a little overwhelming for her.

It lasted forever and a second only.

"Hi, Mike," she greeted, and he blinked. He was taller now, but she had grown too, a bit. His hair was different too, shorter. He looked

different, but managed to still look like her Mike.

Suddenly, he dropped the bike and closed the couple of steps between them. Eleven only had time to open her arms so her ice cream wouldn't be mashed between them before he wrapped her in an embrace. She missed him so damn much. It felt nice.

"You came back," he said, his voice muffled by her hair. "I knew you'd come back."

She lifted her head to look at him better.

"You're not mad at me? I broke the promise," El said, because despite what Nancy said, she still needed to hear it from Mike. He was the first person who taught her what friendship was, and she felt like she'd ruined it somehow, even though she was certain she had done the right thing.

Mike shook his head.

"Don't even worry about it, El," he answered, and okay, it was a good enough reply for her. For now, at least.

Perhaps her Hawkins friends had more faith in her than Eleven herself, but she was glad they did. This friendship, this bond she shared with the boys was what kept her sane while she was gone. Now that she was back, she would make sure to enjoy every moment.

A/N: Thanks for reading :D Reviews are welcome!

2. February

Author's note: WOW, I did not expect this quick response, and such a warm one! Thank you, guys, so much! I'm glad you enjoyed the first chapter, and I hope the same happens right now. I already have this fic outlined for the first 5 months of the year, let's see what will come out.

Have a nice chapter, and I hope you leave your review at the end! Reviews are love.

February

She spent a ridiculous amount of time sitting in Hopper's living room making cards because, apparently, Valentine's Day is a big deal. It's a hell of a job, because crafts were never her thing. Hell, she'd barely had time to be just a kid growing up, so the overload of information she got about "social skills" and "mainstream knowledge" the past three weeks still make her a little dizzy (Sometimes it just felt like the others were messing with her, but they were her friends, right? And friends don't mess with each other).

By the end of the afternoon, there was a mess of colorful papers around the living room and a pile of poorly made cards for every person in Eleven's life who was important for her. Nancy used a lot of emphasis on saying that the whole point of Valentine's Day was to tell the people she liked how much they mattered for her, so El should at least *try* to make something nice.

"Wow, kid, how many people you know?" Asked Hopper when he got home. There might be a chance that the dog slept on top of some glitter and stickers, and she did not want to know how to remove everything from its fur. Jim sat on the couch by her side and picked one of the cards that still was unfinished. "Ha, I hated to make those when I was a kid," he said, and then looked at Eleven. "But I loved to receive cards, 'specially from the cute girls."

Eleven smiled. All she wanted, really, was for her friends to enjoy the cards she made for them, because it took a lot of time and effort to

make them.

Jim reached for another card, the one on top of the pile of 'ready-for-tomorrow', but El put her hand on top of them. She suspected that he had seen his name on it, though.

"Tomorrow," she said as he raised his hands up, as if surrendering, and he nodded.

"Okay, fine," he replied, leaning back a little. "Gee, kid."

He looked down then and saw a lot of ripped paper by her side on the floor. He could make out some Ms and Ks, which made him look at the coffee table and the card Eleven was making now. It was a blue and purple heart-shaped card with one name written in capital letters – MIKE - and nothing else, a white crayon held tight in her right hand.

"You know, cards aren't the only thing you can give out on Valentine's Day," Hopper said, trying to distract El. She looked at him expectantly, probably waiting for him to give her a solution, and he sighed. "Chocolates are always nice."

"Nancy said that girls don't *give* chocolate, they just receive it," she said, and he smiled.

"Okay..." he thought for a second. "You can hang out, it's nice. Watch a movie. No, you need money for this, and you're all fourteen. Go to the park! Hmm ... I'm not very creative, actually. Stick to the cards."

Eleven sighed and looked down at her card.

"I don't know what to write," she admitted, and Hopper put a hand on her shoulder comfortingly.

"You will figure out," he assured, and she sighed. "Why don't you go do something else for a while and then come back to this?"

That was actually the best idea he gave to her, so El nodded and got up. She took her pile of cards and left it in her bedroom, and then she got a broom to clean the living room; she organized the things she was using for the cards on the coffee table, put on a jacket and then

called the dog to stay with her outside so she could clean its fur.

She sat on the back porch with a hairbrush. The sun was almost gone by the time she started to have some progress removing all the stickers from the dog, and the lake looked so pretty from her angle. It hadn't frozen during the winter, and the water was calm and transparent. It was nice.

Suddenly, Eleven got up. She knew what to do. She dropped the brush and rushed inside the house again, the dog tagging along just behind her. Jim was on the same spot watching TV.

"Can we invite some people over tomorrow?" Asked El, and Hopper looked at her frowning.

"We'd have to clean the house," he answered, and she shrugged.

"If we clean the house...?" She poked and they exchanged a glance for a few seconds.

"...Then yes," Hopper said slowly, already sensing that he'd regret it.

El practically ran to the other room, got the broom again and dropped it by his feet, and then she got the phone.

"What are you *doing*?" He asked, looking from the broom to Eleven. She looked at him with those big brown eyes like the puppy that she was, that way he couldn't say no to.

"Get started," she told him. "I will make some calls."

He opened his mouth to protest, to say that they hadn't decided anything, but he gave up. El already had dialed the first number and, on the other side, someone already had picked up.

"Joyce? Oh, hi Nancy! Are you busy tomorrow?" Eleven said excitedly. There was no way in hell that he'd stop that.

Eleven made Jim rent a movie (*Star Wars*), had him dig out his old turntable from the basement because the Byers would bring some discs, and actually had him going to the kitchen to help her bake a red velvet cake and cookies. All of that on top of the cleaning of the

previous night.

They had done so many things that Jim really thought that El wouldn't have the energy to host a bunch of people, but apparently he had forgotten how it is to be young, because after a shower the girl was a hundred percent ready.

Before the first guests arrived, Eleven approached him. She had put her hair in a ponytail and had chosen one of her most "average" outfits – jeans, boots, the Super Bowl tee that he had gotten her when they went to watch the game, and a jacket – which surprised him, considering how girls liked to look all fierce at Valentine's Day. Not Eleven's case, it seemed.

Hopper doubted that he'd ever get used to it.

"This is for you," El said, taking a yellow and pink card from her jacket, the one he had seen the previous day.

He took the card and right at that moment they heard the sound of a car parking, so Eleven ran to the front door and Jim used that moment to see what she had written.

The front of the card had a drawing that wasn't there before; it was him, her and the dog. *Family*, she wrote. He opened it. *To Hopper*, it read inside *Thank you.*

Hopper smiled and closed the card quickly. That little Eggos lover, she knew how to hit him right in the feelings.

Hopefully, the arrival of the Byers with Dustin was a good enough distraction for him not to get all teary-eyed in the middle of the kitchen. Besides the discs, Joyce also brought an casserole, which made Hopper frown.

"Don't worry," said Will. "Jonathan made it."

Well, that explained it.

Eleven gave them their cards and got a few cards herself. Jonathan went further and gave her his Ramones jacket (apparently, she was into punk, which Hopper wasn't a fan of and hoped would be just a

phase), but Dustin and Will didn't have anything big for Eleven.

Lucas and Mike came with Nancy, who also had brought food and baby Holly. El gave them the remaining cards, leaving Mike the last one, and she didn't wait for him to read it like she had done with Joyce and Dustin. No, she went to the back door, to the back porch.

Mike opened his heart-shaped card. *Follow me*, it read, and he frowned as he looked up from it, looking for Eleven. He saw her standing at the back door, and when their eyes met, she smiled and stepped back, letting the door close in front of her. He smiled and followed her instructions.

Once he opened the door, it seemed like the world burst into movement: the sun was shining in shades of red, El was leaning against the fence facing him, and the lake… it was splashing and bursting like a water show. It was silent and precise, hypnotic even. Breathtaking. And she was making that happen with her mind and hands.

El smiled when she saw the look on Mike's face. She was getting stronger, and using her powers was getting easier too. Not very, but she was getting good at this. She turned around, fingers moving as if coordinating the water's movements, and wow, that looked *awesome*! It even made him smile.

"Amazing," Mike breathed, stepping closer. He stood by El's side, his arm touching hers even if there were so many layers between them.

He looked at her enchanted, but then he saw her nose bleeding, and Eleven lost her balance. Mike caught her easily as she collapsed on his chest, and the water of the lake came down with a splash. El held his arm; she was leaning heavy against his chest.

"Did you like it?" she asked looking up at him, her voice a little hoarse.

"Yeah, it's incredible," he said, his eyes still on the lake that started to calm down again. "Did you show them?"

She shook her head.

"It's my Valentine for you," she said, standing straighter. Mike's eyes widened.

"You did that for *me*?" he exclaimed, and she nodded. "Damn, I really need to step up my game, I only brought you chocolate."

El smiled.

"Chocolate is good," she assured. She was feeling better already, and she wiped the blood with the back of her hand. "I'm stronger now. I can do it again," she told him already turning to the lake, but Mike held her waist.

"No, it's okay," he said quickly. "I already have the memory, it's cool enough."

Eleven looked at him and smiled. She liked the way he thought, he took care of her even when he didn't need to. She was holding his jacket with both hands, and he still was holding her waist, his grip steady.

There was a bit of a fire in Mike's eyes that El recognized, one that said that he'd do it again, he'd kiss her, except that this time she'd be ready, and she'd be able to enjoy it.

She stepped closer, tilting her head, and he leaned in, his arm going around her waist, and their noses touched, and-

"El, come tell the people about how you decided to be a baker," Hopper interrupted, making the kids jump a foot high and at least three feet apart. He didn't even look bothered by their flushed cheeks and guilty expressions. "They are so impressed by your cookies, I can't wait for them to see the cake. Come on, you can't be outside, you gotta be a good host."

El looked at Mike, who just smiled sweetly, and then Holly came running to her brother's arms, so their opportunity really had passed, but they'd have time again, she was sure.

She followed Jim's lead and went back inside. It *was* her idea to call that many people, though she was hoping on Joyce being a good enough distraction for Hopper so she could stay with her friends

more freely. Not today, it seemed. But it was okay. From across the room, she exchanged a look with Will, and he shrugged. They would find time to put their plan in action soon. Together.

3. March

Author's note: This is a little different and the shortest chapter so far. Also, the next chapter might take a bit longer to come, but it's already on the way.

Also, Mike/Eleven lovers? Hold on tight. There's more to come soon.

Thanks for the love, and have a nice chapter! ^^

March

The government finally approached Jim Hopper on the first of March, but it's only a couple of weeks later, under many protests and many "ASK HER!" from Joyce that he sat Eleven down to talk.

"You know you have a biological mother, right?" He asked right away, and though she looked uneasy, she nodded. "She can't take care of you, though, she's very ill."

"I know," Eleven said, her voice quiet.

Hopper shifted uncomfortably on his side of the sofa. That was *not* a nice subject for the night but, well, that was why he had brought pizza in the first place. Pizza always made everything easier.

"There are a few options," he continued, and El was looking at him and absorbing every single word he'd say. "You could stay with one of us, whoever you want; or they can put you in the system and you would go to a foster home-"

"But I already live with you," Eleven said, worry and confusion in her face. They all knew how nervous she got when she had to move to a new place or be near people she didn't know.

"Yeah, but it's a temporary thing, El," Hopper explained, and she frowned. "Right?"

"You want me to go?" She asked, and he could sense the heartbreak from where he was sitting.

Hopper looked right at El then. His slice of pizza was untouched because he was feeling unbelievably not hungry, and the way she was looking at him made his stomach close even more. He didn't want her to go, not at all. When Sarah died, he'd been tripping, but after the kids found Eleven at that fateful November, he had been having some purpose.

Ever since El came back, he offered her the bedroom that was supposed to be his daughter's, though when he moved to Hawkins Jim already knew that Sarah wouldn't need it, and he'd been experiencing the joy of taking care of someone again. He *liked* that, he liked that Eleven was both smart and innocent, and that he could teach her about the world.

"No," Jim answered finally, there were tears filling her eyes. He shouldn't have brought the subject up. "Not unless you want to go. I like to have you around, kid, I'd love to have you here and to see you grow, but this isn't about me. It's your call, El."

"What if I want to stay?" She asked, a couple of tears dropped on her cheeks. She had forgotten all about her pizza as well. "What happens?"

Jim needed a couple of seconds to hide the surprise in his heart. Did she really think that she should stay with him?

"Then we'd get started with the adoption papers," he told her. "And you'll have to choose a new name, and a surname, and then we'd have to enroll you in school too."

Eleven hummed and looked down at the plate on her lap. She was frowning again, and she wiped the tears from her cheeks with the heel of her hands. School was a little scary, and she wasn't sure if she could keep up with it. The boys were always so worried about classes and exams, and sometimes she was certain that both Will and Nancy would have a nervous breakdown, but that wasn't the part that worried her.

"I like my name," she confessed, and Hopper raised an eyebrow.

"But you can't be called 'Eleven'," he said. "Your birth name is Jane

Ives."

"Can't I be just El?" She asked, looking at him again, and he leaned against the back of the sofa.

"That's quite a short name," he pondered, and Eleven waited. "You sure you don't want to be called Jane?" She shook her head no, and he nodded considering. "Maybe we can keep the nickname and choose some other actual name for you. Like... Elle. We'd just add two more letters and the sound would be the same, what do you think?"

Eleven considered it in her head, and then on her tongue.

"Elle," she echoed, and then nodded. "I like it."

Hopper smiled.

"Of course you do, it's basically the same name you were given when you arrived in our boring little lives," he joked, and even though she didn't understand exactly what he meant, she matched his smile. "Now you also have to choose which last name you're going with."

"Ives?" Eleven asked, and Hopper shrugged.

"If you want to," he said. "You can have a completely new name, the people from the government said you'd have all new documents and identity, so you can even invent a new surname that will be only yours."

She thought about it for a few seconds, and then she decided that she needed more than a few seconds to come up with a decision.

"When do we start with the papers?" She asked, and Hopper looked at the calendar hung on the wall just for habits sake, because he knew exactly when the special social workers would come back.

"In a couple of days," he told her, and she bit her lower lip.

"Can I think it over? The surname thing?"

Hopper nodded, and the subject died as fast as it was brought up.

They resumed to their pizzas and sodas, and turned on the TV to watch some movie that they didn't really pay attention to. El went to bed first, and Jim slept on the sofa for old times' sake. They didn't talk about it until the social worker came on the following Monday with a bunch of papers to fill out and read and sign. Eleven made a big show of sitting across from Hopper as she filled out the papers that had her basic information, like birthdate, gender and name.

When she got up and crossed the kitchen to give the papers to the social worker, she didn't say a word, but that wasn't even news. Though she had been talking more, in longer sentences, it still was her signature to express herself more through body language than words. The social worker seemed satisfied with the information given by El and worked to fill a few blank spaces on the papers Jim would have to sign.

"Okay," the social worker said, putting an impressive pile of papers in front of Hopper, and then she took the one on top. "James Hopper, you're adopting 13 year old Jane Ives, born on August 1st, 1971, through a deal with the American government. From this day on, the child will be called Elle Hopper and be under your care. Do you have any questions? Elle?"

El shook her head no, but Jim was looking at her, a mix of joy and surprise that she really didn't understand. She had said several times that he felt like family for her, so it was the next obvious thing to make it official. (She'd had long conversations with Mrs. Wheeler and Joyce about the whole adoption matter, and they explained a lot of things to her, clarifying any doubt she'd have and leading her to some certain choices.)

"Hopper?" He said, and she could swear he sounded emotional. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," El said with conviction and looked at the social worker as if emphasizing it. Jim mirrored her.

"No, no questions," he replied at last. "Let's sign these things."

4. April

Author's note: 3 days between chapters is not to bad, right?

You might notice that I'm inventing all those birth dates. Shhh!

April

This is how she ended up here: because, according to Jonathan, she was a sucker for pleasing the guys. More specifically, Dustin. But you've got to understand that he had put things so plain and factual that she had no way to say no.

"You *have* to help me, El, you *have to*!" Dustin had pleaded, practically kneeling in front of her. To be honest, she didn't '*have to*' do anything, she was aware, but she chose to hear him out. "Do you have any idea how much it sucks to be born on April Fool's Day?" She hadn't. "Last year, the guys kept talking behind my back for weeks, or stop talking when I arrived and I thought they were planning a surprise party, but when my birthday came? Nothing. That was their prank. Not even a card. And then, on the 2nd, they were like '*Oh, it was your birthday yesterday, right?*' Those assholes."

El had no idea what he meant, but she nodded, smiled and frowned at the right moments. She was getting good at figuring out which faces to make instead of being just amazed, confused or shocked most of the time. In part, it was because being around them more was improving her social skills *a lot*, but in part it was because Jim, who wasn't much of a 'people person' had been teaching her a lot of tricks.

"Now, this is my clap back chance, El," continued Dustin. He sounded very dramatic. "And *you* are my asset. Please say yes."

El thought about it for a few seconds.

"How come you need my help?" she asked, trying to understand his point, and he widened his eyes as if it was an absurd question.

"Because you can move shit with your mind!" he explained, gestures

and all, and she chuckled. Dustin was funny. "Look, I know what you mean, a lot of steps in my plan are things that I can do alone-"

"More like all of them," she corrected, and he waved it off.

"Yeah, whatever," Dustin dismissed. "But if you help me, it will cut the preparation in half, the chance of me getting caught will drop to zero, *and* we'll get out of it *dry*. So? What do you say?"

"You are…" El started, struggling to find the right word. "Ambitious," she completed thoughtfully. "I like it."

So technically, *that* was how she ended up here, soaking wet outside the principal's office with the boys, even thought she wasn't enrolled and the school couldn't punish her in any way. Because Dustin had decided that it would be neat to create a lazy river in the school's corridors, and for that they needed the fire hoses, and to ring an alarm to lure everyone out of classes, and then she had to lock the doors and somehow Dustin managed to stack gallons of water and she'd made that water flow.

"This is awesome!" he had exclaimed as water ran around them and they could hear people shouting and cheering all around. El mirrored his smile.

The water was running knee high, but with the waves it went above their waist. Except for El and Dustin, who were in their own dry bubble, not being touched by a drop. Eleven needed a lot of concentration to have all those things going on at the same time – the locked doors, the map of the school's corridors, the control of the water - but it was good practice, and it was *fun*, just like Dustin promised.

"El, you are awesome!" exclaimed the boy, turning to see the movement around them. There were notebooks and shoes going with the flow.

"I know, you guys say that all the time!" replied El with some pride. "Hey, Dustin?" she called, and he looked at her. Her smile grew wider. "Happy birthday."

"Oh, thank-NO! EL!" he shouted, because with a mischievous grin, she pushed him in the water. "TRAITOR!"

Dustin slipped, and on his way down he used the momentum to grab El's arm and bring her down with him, which broke her concentration and sent a wave through the whole school. Both of them were submitted to the fury of their own flood and dragged several feet from their starting point, the water going down as they laughed on the floor.

"Well, that was neat," Dustin said sprawled on the floor. El's head was resting on his stomach, and she was still laughing.

"Best birthday so far?" she asked, and he smiled.

"Definitely."

There were shouts and laughing echoing, and they heard the squeaks of footsteps approaching so they sat up, both analyzing their wet state. The floor looked disgusting, and there still was water rolling because they left the hoses open. Luckily, it was the rest of the gang that arrived.

"I knew you were here!" exclaimed Will, wet from head to toe. They all were, even Lucas, who was taller than everyone already.

"How could you know?" El asked as Mike helped her to her feet. He used his thumb to wipe a little bit of blood from her nose.

"Who else would be able to do something like that?" Lucas said crossing his arms. He had a point.

"Besides," added Mike. "Dustin was dying to recruit you to some of his epic pranks since we met you. We figured it was about time."

El looked back to Dustin, who shrugged unapologetically.

"The bad news, though," continued Lucas. "Is that the water probably destroyed your birthday present."

Dustin's eyed widened. That was probably the worst news for him.

"You're joking," he said at the same time El said "No, it didn't."

Everyone looked at her then, so she said it again.

"It didn't."

Too bad that the next thing that happened was the inspector arriving with Mr. Clarke and a couple of other teachers looking for the source of the water and finding five teenagers at the crime scene. And then, they were waiting in front of the principal's office. Mike was extremely nervous, bouncing his leg and biting his nails, Will and Lucas were talking about someone called Lexi who had tripped and grabbed Lucas for dear life, and Dustin was calmly seated across from El, not even worried.

And if Dustin, who had idealized the whole thing, was this chill, Eleven had no reason to feel nervous, so she gently reached and put a hand on Mike's knee.

"Relax," she said. When he looked at her, he stopped biting his nail too.

"El, you don't get it, they can stop us from coming to the Spring Ball," he fake-hushed, catching the others' attention.

"They can't do that!" She protested. She was *not* going to lose another ball with Mike over this, even though she had no idea how balls were supposed to be, or if she'd even like it.

"Except that they can, if they decide to," Mike insisted, and Dustin disagreed.

"Uh, no, they can't," said the birthday boy. "Think about it, guys, they have nothing on us. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time. How on earth would we, five teenagers, be able to create that river thing?"

They all looked at Eleven, who looked at them too, and then it started to hit them... Hopper and Joyce Byers were the only adults in the whole Hawkins city who knew that El was capable of doing such things. It didn't matter that it was obvious in their *head* that El was all the incredible things that she was, who with a straight head would

guess that a 5' tall girl could do such things?

"Believe me," Dustin said, his voice hoarse. "We're clean. For all they know, we're victims here."

Lucas smiled and nodded in agreement, and he and Will went back to talking about Lexi.

"Okay, makes sense," Mike agreed, holding El's hand and lacing his fingers with hers. "But how do we explain you being here?"

She shrugged.

"I came to my friend's surprise party," she looked at Dustin, who raised an eyebrow, and the other guys protested.

"OH, COME ON, EL!" and "I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU RUINED IT" among their loud complaints, and she only laughed.

El rested her head on Mike's shoulder. The secretary had told her that she'd have to contact her legal guardian to come get her, and she was waiting to see what Hopper would have to say about their little prank. But for now, she could just enjoy holding Mike's hand and being close, even though they still were so wet and her cardigan was heavy on her shoulders.

He had stopped bouncing his leg, and now he was tracing circles on the back of her hand with his thumb, his eyes on their laced fingers. The gesture lulled her like nothing else.

"Mike," El said, looking up at him, and he looked at her too. "Pranks are cool."

It wasn't what he expected her to say, but made him smile.

"When they are harmless, yes," he said. "But I can explain it better to you later. Okay?"

She nodded, and they just kept looking at each other for a while, and a while longer, even after Dustin scoffed -

"You two are *ridiculous*."

And they just stopped when Hopper and Mrs. Sinclair came in running to see what the hell was going on and why their kids were being held without proof of anything.

A/N: They set up a smol surprise party in the AV room, with cake, sodas and a rare version of Monty Python waiting for Dustin.

5. May

Author's note: this one is to test your sugar levels, heh.

Guys, I'm trying to make some extra money, so I'm taking commissions. If you feel like helping, check the details at "breakthestrutura. tumblr commissions". Thank yall, and have a nice chapter! :D

May

Joyce was right, hair can *shine!* That was what El was thinking as she looked in the mirror in Nancy's room. The girl staring back at her had rosy cheeks, glossy lips and bright brown curls falling down her shoulders. Pretty.

"Up or down?" asked Nancy, standing behind her and bringing her attention back. El frowned.

"I don't know," she answered, turning slightly to the left and to the right to… how did Will put it? Work her angles. "What do you think?"

Nancy smiled, touching Eleven's hair with light fingers.

"I think…" she said, pushing El's hair back. "That we should highlight your nice rack."

"Rack?" echoed El confused, and Nancy let go of her hair, practically embracing the younger girl to gesture like a frame on her chest. El looked down and then up at her reflection. "Hmm… okay."

She ended up with her hair partially braided, the few loose locks far from her shoulders and framing her face. The result was simple and beautiful, and El loved it.

"Did you tell Mike the color of your dress?"

El nodded, standing up. The shoes weren't very comfortable, but they looked pretty with the dress – a strapless light green knee-length

puffy dress that Joyce and Will helped her pick.

"What is its color name?" El wondered. "I just said greenish."

Nancy chuckled.

"Aqua, I guess," she answered. "Which might be a problem, because 'aqua' and 'greenish' are very different, but it suits you. I'm so glad I'll be here to see Mike's face. *I made Jonathan lend me one of his cameras*," she said the last part in a whisper, as if it was a confession.

Eleven smiled and smoothed the skirt of her dress.

"Will said he'll like it," El said, and then looked at Nancy, who had a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, I'm sure," she nodded seriously.

El guessed that Nancy knew her brother pretty well, because as soon as she came down the stairs, he just stood there gaping at her. Will poked him.

"Told you," he whispered, and El took a deep breath.

"Good?" She asked, and Mike blinked, as if finally snapping out of a trance.

"Fuck yeah," he replied breathlessly, to his mother's displeasure.

"Michael!" Mrs. Wheeler protested, hiding Holly behind her as if it would keep the girl from listening.

"Sorry," he apologized without even looking at her. He only had eyes for El. She stepped closer and they saw a flash. "Nancy!"

Nancy only smiled behind the camera, ready to snap another picture, and Mike remembered the flowers he had bought for El. He got a small transparent box from the table where there was a wristband made of baby's-breath that he put on her left wrist, and there was another arrangement of baby's-breath that she put on the lapel of his black jacket. Their attention was broken by a sigh, and the teens looked at Mrs. Wheeler.

"You both look so lovely!" She exclaimed, a hand on her chest. "Come, Nancy, take a picture of them!"

They barely had time for a couple of pictures before they heard a dramatic sequel of honks.

"LAST BALL BEFORE HIGH SCHOOL!" Someone (clearly Dustin) shouted outside, and Holly ran ahead of them to the front door.

"It's Dustin!" The little girl exclaimed jumping up and down, and they all went to the door; Lucas did the same two houses down.

Eleven looked at Dustin's red suit, as well as the red limousine he had rented, the way he had brushed his hair back, straightening the curls with gel, and then she looked at Mike.

"Is this a big deal?" She asked frowning. Mike smiled and touched the bridge between her eyebrows to stop her from frowning.

"Only if you make it," he answered.

"Which Dustin does," added Will. "Like, *a lot*."

"Come on, guys, we still have to go get the girls!" Dustin opened the door of the limo. "El, you look great."

"Thank you," she answered with a little bow. "Red suits you."

"I know, right?"

"Please, tell me you didn't save the money you made last summer to *rent a limo*," said Lucas shaking his head.

"I didn't," Dustin assured, and then he looked at Eleven and whispered, "I totally did."

She laughed and looked at Mike, who was shaking his head.

"This is important, guys. I need to make a big entrance," Dustin explained as they all entered in the car. "I'm the MC, after all."

Lucas was the last to get in and right after he closed the door, the car

took off.

"What's a 'MC'?" asked Eleven.

"It's the Master of Ceremonies," explained Lucas. "Like a presenter. He's going to do all the announcements and entertain the crowd."

She nodded impressed.

"Cool."

"That's why we have to go *so damn early*," continued Lucas, and Dustin rolled his eyes. El leaned back ready to enjoy some bickering and Mike seemed to do the same, putting his arm around her shoulders. "Is Oksana really your co-host?"

"Yeesss," Dustin replied with a big smile.

"Oh, I'll finally meet Oksana?" asked El. She heard a lot about the foreign exchange student during the preparation days before April Fool's Day, but her question was muffled by Lucas's protests.

"This is gonna be a horror show!" He provoked. "Whose idea was it to have the accented people presenting the ball? Like, seriously!"

Will laughed, and Dustin started to protest that he *did not* have an accent, but then the car came to a stop in front of Jenny's house, so Will had to get out to get his date for the night. By the time he came back, the other two were still bickering, and not even Jenny's presence there made them stop. It went on for a couple of blocks more until they got to Lexi's house, and Lucas had to get out of the car.

"Driver, let's go, leave him here," joked Dustin, and the driver looked at them through the rearview mirror.

"No, don't do that," Mike interfered just to make sure.

Lexi was a tiny Latina with green eyes from the gymnastics team who was practically half of Lucas's size. She was bubbly and funny, and immediately started calling Eleven 'Ellie', which was rather nice. Hopper did say that El needed more 'girl friends' (he wasn't a big fan

of her being around so many boys), so maybe this Ball would be her chance.

They got to Oksana's house last. She was a stunning blonde, a foreign exchange student from the Ukraine who would leave at the end of the summer. Dustin had a *huge* crush on her, but the boys always joked that with his luck she was probably gay. That meant nothing for El, of course, and if she had an opinion about Oksana and her thick accent, it was that she was a really funny person, which matched Dustin's personality a lot. Those two together could make a party not suck.

There already was a bit of a crowd when they arrived, and being the one who had the idea of renting the limo, Dustin got out first, helping Oksana out of the car too. The rest of the gang followed, leaving their tickets at the entrance of the gymnasium.

It looked way different from the time they had used it to help El find Will. Where once there was the pool, now had a colorful set, with fake vines hanging from the roof, and several flowers all around. Across the court, they had built a stage where a band was playing a song that El didn't recognize. Near the bleachers, they set up a long table filled with finger food, and right by the door there was spring scenario where people were having their photo taken.

"Come on, guys!" called Dustin, taking Oksana's hand and dragging her to the photo scenario as soon as the couple in it started to leave. "Group photo!"

"We can do this later," replied Mike, and Dustin glared at him.

"Seriously, Mike? You want to wait for the rest of the school to arrive, to get in a line? You want to get your photo after getting all sweaty on the dance floor?"

Well, he hadn't thought about it that way, so after a couple of seconds considering it, they all shrugged and joined Dustin. Two high school seniors from the photography club were their photographers, which meant that Jonathan was there, and being there he had a say on how many photos his little brother could have, which also meant that together - as a group and as couples – they ended up spending a

whole roll of film.

"Madonna!" Lexi exclaimed as soon as they left the scenario. There was a little bit of a line forming already. "I love her! Isn't she the best?" she talked nonstop, taking El by the hand and bringing her to the dance floor. Eleven didn't know *one* song from Madonna, but she was afraid she'd offend someone by saying it. The dance floor was on fire with people dancing and shouting the lyrics. "Come on, Ellie! *Like a virgin! Touched for the very first time!*"

She sang and danced, and held Eleven's hands to make her dance too. The lyrics were catchy, and the rhythm was nice, El was quickly getting how to move according to it. Soon, she was singing along too, sort of, and dancing and laughing with Lexi.

"What does the song mean?" asked El. She had to repeat it twice until Lexi heard her, and the girl laughed.

"Ellie, you're funny!" she answered, not really explaining the song. She'd have to ask someone else later.

She lost sight of Mike and the boys for a couple of songs until she spotted them by the stage. Dustin and Oksana had to spend most of the time there because of all the emceeing they had to do, so Eleven decided to join them; this time, she was the one to drag Lexi along.

When they got there, Oksana, Will, Jenny and Dustin were dancing, though Dustin was singing more than anything else. Mike and Lucas were just kind of moving to the beat a couple of feet from them.

"*Just stop! 'cause I really love you! Stop! I'll be thinking of you!*" he sang, all big gestures, making El laugh.

"You know," Lucas shouted over the music. "It's really embarrassing that he knows all the lyrics of Captain & Tenille."

Despite that, Lucas *was* dancing a bit with Lexi, which was cute. His petite date was wearing really high heels and still managed to be smaller than El, which made her understand why the lazy river was so violent for her. The contrast of the couple was quite adorable.

"Do you want something to drink?" asked Mike in her ear, and El

nodded.

He diverged from overexcited people jumping and turning, got to the table, got a couple of cups, and by the time he came back, Eleven was mirroring Dustin and Oksana's dance moves.

"Nonono," Mike kept repeating as he gave his drinks to Will and Jenny and took El's hand to take her far from the Ball's hosts. "You don't want to be seen dancing like *that*, trust me," he guaranteed when she looked at him confused, and Dustin exclaimed a protest.

"Take her to dance then, Mike!" said Lexi, though it sounded a lot like a dare. "Or isn't it true what I heard about you waiting to have a dance with her for almost two years?"

Mike glared at Lucas for five long seconds, but Lucas was never one to be intimidated, so it didn't work very well. Lexi's words, though, were very efficient. He looked at El, his hand tightening on hers a bit.

"Wanna dance, El?" Mike asked, and she was looking right at him that way she did, so intense and warm he could feel himself melting inside.

"Yes," El said right away, and it was almost as if she was the one leading him to the dance floor.

The moment they arrived to the middle of the dance floor, the song changed to something slower, calmer, and Eleven suddenly didn't know what to do. She looked up at Mike, waiting for the next move, and he was smiling looking at the band on the stage. He shook his head, and then looked at El.

Mike pulled her closer gently, guiding her left hand to his shoulder, and he held her waist with his right hand. They were really close, and it felt really nice.

"Just follow my lead, okay?" he said, and El nodded. He started to sway her to the left and to the right. "I'm not much of a dancer, I'm more of a musician," he told her. "So… sorry if this sucks."

El couldn't stop looking at him, and his words sounded quite absurd.

"Mike," she replied, and he waited. "This is perfect."

It looked like her answer was satisfying, because he chuckled, and she held a bit tighter to his shoulder and hand. It was a beautiful thing when Mike smiled; it enchanted her.

She recognized that song, the first of the night. Hopper had an album; he told her once that it was Sarah's favorite. Mike's touch lightened on her waist and he stepped back, still holding her hand, and then making her turn once before he returned to their previous position, which made her laugh.

"*You ask me 'will my love grow?'*" Mike sang. For her. She knew the lyrics and listened with expectation. "*I don't know, I don't know. You stick around now, it might show, I don't know, I don't know…*"

They had stopped swaying, and were now looking at each other. There was a familiarity to that moment of expectation right before a kiss now, because they had been living a lot of those the past month. They were interrupted so many times already that El was actually getting scared about kissing Mike, as if the whole magic would break as soon as they crossed that line.

But God, how she wanted to kiss him!

Something in the way she knows, and all I have to do is think of her – sang the vocalist. *Screw the line*, El thought. *Something in the way she shows me…*

She leaned closer, and he leaned down meeting her halfway. Her hand went to the back of his neck, and his arm went around her waist again, and they kissed – just a touch of lips at first, eyes immediately closing with the contact, and El breathed, more like sighed, parting her lips just slightly, just enough.

The spell broke all right, but not the magic. She held Mike closer, fingers tangling in his short hair. The way he made her tilt her head to deepen the kiss, and how they seemed to know exactly what to do, even if it was a bit sloppy and so different from their first kiss just added a feeling of righteousness to this, whatever *this* was or meant.

After what seemed like a long time, they parted, but only enough to catch some air. There was a different shine in their eyes, their cheeks were flushed and breath shallow. When they kissed again, they kept their eyes open for most of it, and it didn't feel weird, just right. Like everything about them.

6. June

Author's note: This is officially the shortest chapter ever, but I promise that July will be a lot longer! (maybe not as long as May was, but definitelly more than 600 words)

Thank you all for the feedback, have a nice chapter and I see you soon! :D

PS: In case you're wondering, El asked some people about the meaning of Like a Virgin. Jim said that he liked it better when she was listening to punk, Joyce didn't know the song, the boys blushed and stuttered and couldn't be clear enough to explain anything. Finally, among hms and ews, Nancy more or less was able to give her a bit of an idea of what Madonna meant, but the whole concept is still a little lost on El. Give her time, guys. She'll get it eventually.

June

They tried every movie trope they knew, from locking the couple in a room together, to sending flowers and cards one to both of them in each other's names, and dropping those little hints that one might be *talking* about the other, but nothing seemed to work. Hopper and Joyce didn't seem to work it out.

The teens were almost giving up. Almost. Until Will's birthday barbecue at the Hoppers.

"Three more cards," Mike said to Eleven as she pouted at him. They were all ready for a swim in the lake. It was a beautiful sunny day in Hawkins, but El would have to take a test soon to prove that she could start school directly into 9th grade. "Come on, El, you know the answer. What are the main components of a cell?"

From the kitchen, Joyce and Jim observed. Will was on the sofa, Dustin and Lucas had positioned themselves in front of the fan, Mike and El were on the floor, and Steve, Jonathan and Nancy were in charge of the grill.

Jim had a funny look on his face, though, holding his beer with determination, but not drinking any, and it amused Joyce. She followed his gaze and wasn't surprised to see that he was looking at El.

"So," she started lighting a cigarette up, and he looked at her just as quickly. "How do you like being a dad again?"

Jim kind of sighed, kind of scoffed.

"Yeah, I mean," he shrugged. "It's good, she's a gift. But you gotta understand, Joyce, I lost my kid almost six years ago and now I land my ass with a teenage daughter."

Joyce smiled sympathetically.

"I mean," he continued. "I'm learning to deal with these things. Hormones, PMS and stuff… it's complicated."

"It really isn't," she argued. "Besides, you were lucky she didn't go boy-crazy."

This time, Hopper really scoffed.

"Yeah, she's not boy-crazy, she's Mike-crazy!" he pointed to the living room where El had just answered her last card correctly and celebrated with some smooching.

Joyce oh-ed, not really sorry and offered him a smoke. He shook his head.

"No, the kid is making me stop."

"*She is*?" asked Joyce impressed, and Jim nodded. "Well, ain't she making an impact?"

"Can we go to the lake now?" They heard Lucas ask.

"Yeah, you didn't have to wait for us!" answered Mike getting up, his hand on the small of Eleven's back guiding her as if she didn't know her way around her own house.

Maybe that whole teenage daughter thing was too much for Hopper. He wasn't ready.

"Isn't it better?" said Joyce, bringing his attention back to her. "I've known Mike since he was a baby, he's a good kid. Or would you rather she meets some punk you never heard of from school?"

Hopper sighed, leaning back. They could hear the shouts of the teens outside, the water splashing. His beer had gone hot. He must be really deep in this parenting shit if he allowed his beer to get hot.

"I guess," he shrugged. Jim got up and discarded his beer to get another, and also went to check the barbecue (which was actually an excuse to check El in the lake).

"Jim," called Joyce, and he looked at her. She tapped the chair by her side where he was sat before. "Leave them."

He did, for a change. And accepted that smoke after all, along with some nice chat – not about their children, this time, but about something else, about them.

When the teens saw what was finally going on, they stepped back. Better late than never, right?

7. July

Author's note: Are you missing your summer already? Guess what? It's just almost spring in Brazil hehehe

Enjoy the heat I'm sending from Latin America through this classical summer chapter.

And as we like to say here in my little land: k, bye! (a bad translation of "flw, vlw") (brazilians will get it)

July

It started because of Dustin, because he talked nonstop about how excited Oksana was to enjoy the 4th of July for the first time ever. There wasn't such celebration in the Ukraine, and she would remember it *forever*. But maybe that was what he thought. There was no agreement whatsoever that the foreign student would be his date for the fair, not that it discouraged him one bit.

"What's so interesting about it?" asked Eleven, but no one heard her. The boys were occupied with bickering, as usual. Mostly, their constant fights were funny, but sometimes they just annoyed the hell out of her, and when they spent too long on the same subject she felt bored.

"Who's to say that Oksana is not like, a Russian spy or something?" said Lucas just to throw Dustin off. "Think about it: who would suspect a *kid* was sent to destroy us?"

"Who would send someone to destroy Hawkins, Indiana?" replied Will. "We're seriously the most insignificant town ever."

"Uh, I don't know," Mike said. "Have you been paying attention the past couple of years?"

"That's bullshit," cut Dustin, and El was done.

She got up from the sofa and went to the kitchen, got herself some orange juice, and then went up to Mike's room, where she'd have

some *peace*. El chose a book from the bookshelf (*The Karamazov Brothers* sounds like fun, right?), turned the fan on, and sat down on the bed to read. She only made it through three pages before Mike found her.

"We're boring you, aren't we?"

Yes.

"Hmm," El answered instead, shrugging, and Mike smiled. He knew her very well. "Living room was too crowded."

"Yeah, I heard that boys are too spacey," he said, walking over to her. He sat down the bed too, near her legs. She had spent the night there in his bunk bed, wearing one of his shirts. They were so big that they even covered her jeans shorts. Maybe she really was small, like Steve liked to point out. "You know, in real life you won't be able to just get up and leave whenever you get bored or done."

El frowned, a layer of concern on her face.

"No?"

"Nope," said Mike shaking his head. That was really bad news for such a warm day.

"Why?"

"Because we must interact with people and make conversation and pretend we care when really all we want to do is lay down on the floor and scream," he said. She captured a little humor in his tone, but his face was serious. "Unfortunately, we learn that pretty soon in our lives."

Eleven sighed. Being able to get up and leave had been her favorite escape route since ever, what was she going to do now?

"What do I do, then?"

Mike shrugged.

"Listen, wait for your turn to hopefully change the subject, though

that won't work in class… Oh," he sat closer, his eyes shinning a little brighter. "You know how you learned to smile and nod at the right moments?" she nodded. "Next step is to do that *when you're not really paying attention,* it's like, a life changer."

Okay, that sounded better.

"But what if people are too annoying? What do I do?"

"You will learn how to tune them out eventually," Mike assured. "Best thing is to focus on something that you enjoy doing or thinking about. Like… Will likes to draw, so if someone is talking about something that doesn't concern him, and he has a pen in hand, he'll just start to doodle. He doesn't even need a paper, have you noticed his hand?"

She had. It was kind of amazing. Sometimes, Will would even doodle on someone else's skin, and he'd make the most creative things. He once turned her 011 into a floral wristband. Eleven never thought that drawing would be Will's escape route. It made her think of the things she liked that would help her handle boring conversations.

"You gotta consider also," continued Mike, and it took a couple of seconds for her to understand what he was talking about now. "That one can't take Dustin very seriously sometimes. I mean, he really thinks that the firework show will be 'romantic' and will magically make Oksana want to kiss him or something. Have you ever seen fireworks?"

El shook her head. She didn't even know what they were about. Mike didn't seem surprised.

"You know, Hawkins isn't much, but we do have a pretty firework show on the 4th, I think you might like it. Fireworks are loud and colorful and that's how we celebrate being a free country," El raised an eyebrow and Mike smiled. "Makes little to no sense, I know, but it's fun."

"We will see them at the fair?" she asked, and he smiled.

"Yeah. And there are fireworks at New Year's Eve too, which are

bigger and prettier, and that's when it's actually romantic."

"Romantic?" echoed El. She didn't know what it meant.

"Yeah," said Mike, and he thought about it quickly. "It's when you do something to make someone happy, and it doesn't even need to be material, it can be a gesture or words… and if you do it right, then the person will want to be with you or even kiss you."

El fell silent for a moment, thinking about it. Finally, she closed the book, put it down on the bed by her side, and sat straighter to be really close to Mike.

"Like last night?" she asked him. "When you played me the song you wrote for me? It made me happy and I really wanted to kiss you."

"You did, huh?" Mike replied with a half smile.

"Yeah," she bit her lower lip, eyes going down to his lips and back to his eyes. "And it worked, I kissed you. A lot."

"It worked pretty well," he agreed.

"That was romantic," El concluded, and Mike nodded in agreement. She got closer, so close their breath was mixing. "Like right now?"

Mike shook his head.

"No," he said, reaching to cup her cheek with his hand, his thumb tracing the line of her lower lip. "Right now is just so fucking hot."

And simple as that, they were kissing. It was one of those long kisses, with pushing and pulling and lots of tongue that elevate the temperature really fast.

"Mike!" baby Holly stomped up the stairs making a lot of noise, and stopped by her older brother's door. Mike and El were breathing hard. "We home! Nancy bought snacks."

"Good snacks?" he asked her, and the little girl nodded once.

"Candies," she said with a big smile. Her teeth were blue.

El got up right away and went to the door, taking Holly's hand on her way out.

"Tell me, Hol," she said, "is there chocolate among those candies?"

Mike still needed a minute to breathe before he went back down, but he almost wished he had taken longer, because Dustin, Lucas and Will were still talking about the fair between bites of chocolate cake.

"You are just bitter because Lexi dumped you before she left for camp," Dustin was saying, and Lucas growled.

"I told you, no one *dumped* anybody, we *agreed*!"

"Agreed?" echoed Nancy, cutting pieces of cake for everyone. "On what?"

"That we are better off as friends," said Lucas.

"Did you kiss?" asked Will, leaning against the counter with his slice of cake.

"Yeah, and it was super weird! We've known each other since we were toddlers, same class in church and shit. It was like kissing my cousin."

"Which cousin?" asked Dustin.

"Because Maya from Vermont…" added Will with shiny eyes. "I don't think anyone would mind kissing her."

"As *if* you have a chance with her," replied Lucas with certainty. "I don't know why you're shitting on me, how come you didn't kiss Jennifer yet?"

Will made a face.

"Touché," smiled Dustin. El raised an eyebrow from her seat by Holly's side.

"You act as if this conversation isn't about you," she said, and the boys almost choked on their cakes. "Funny."

"Why are you defending Will?" asked Dustin rather offended.

"Wait, wait, wait," cut Nancy, sitting on the other side of Holly. "How is this about Dustin?"

There were a couple of minutes of everyone explaining at the same time what they were talking about for the past hour or so, and Nancy tried her best to keep a straight face. Eleven used that moment to learn on their social skills a bit, but no one could keep a straight face at the "fireworks can be romantic" part. Unceremoniously, Nancy started to laugh.

"Oh, Dustin, you innocent little thing," she said, which was even funnier, because out of all the boys, Dustin could *not* be considered the innocent one.

Those boys… they were annoying sometimes, but oh, how Eleven was glad she met them. Her days were never boring.

A/N: reviews are love, and I know you're full of it! thanks for reading!

8. August

Author's note: See? I did no forget about you all! It's just that this chapter is twice as long as any other chapter I posted before.

Thanks for all the love you guys are sending my way, it means a lot. We're through 2/3 of this journey, can you believe it? Next chapter will have a different vibe to it, but for now I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Have a nice read.

August

There was the adult's agenda, where El woke up in her bed on the 1st of August and Jim made her Eggos with blueberry jam and raspberries on top, and black coffee that she spit out at first, and then she added three cubes of sugar. Eleven liked her life sweet, and Hopper knew that. He just liked to laugh at her faces when she drank black coffee.

"You know how many berries I put in your plate?" he asked when she already was halfway through her brunch.

"Fourteen?" guessed El, her mouth full. She didn't count before she started eating. Jim shook his head.

"Nine," he said, and put an envelope on the table, right in front of her. "Which is the grade you'll be starting next month."

Eleven dropped her fork, mouth ajar with shock, and then she swallowed her food before speaking.

"I passed?" she exclaimed, taking the envelope and opening it as fast as she could.

"You passed," Jim said very proudly. "We will go enroll you later this week. Maybe you'll even be able to have some classes with your friends."

El was mesmerized. She could hardly believe that she made it; she passed that stupid test to go to a normal school! Of course it was nice to be home schooled, and Nancy said that if she got in, she'd have plenty of other stupid tests to pass, but at least she would be with her friends, with Mike.

"Best birthday gift ever," she said, holding the letter close to her chest.

"Well, the day is just starting, kid," said Jim, and it sounded like a promise.

It was. Later that morning, people gathered at the Hoppers for a meal and some cake. The Byers, who were practically family, Dustin with his older brother, the Sinclairs and the Wheelers, all of them. Steve, Lexi and Jennifer arrived in time for the cake. (No one asked questions about the weird dynamic of Nancy, Jonathan and Steve, and Mike said that he didn't even give a shit because they would each be in a different state next month, so why worry?)

This time, there were fourteen candles on El's cake. It was the first time ever that she had a birthday party, and even though she went to Dustin's and Will's parties, this was different, this was *hers*. Among the presents, Hopper gave her an old music player that she absolutely loved, Will made her a portrait, Lucas gave her a pair of sunglasses, Dustin gave her two Star Trek tees, Nancy got her a pair of boots, Lexi gave her a beautiful short dress that had Hop saying a long sequel of 'Nos', and Mike recorded her a mix. They were all perfect.

"You are staying at Lexi's, then?" Hopper asked later that afternoon.

Eleven nodded seriously. That was agenda number two, teens only. By El's side, Lexi grinned.

"All the girls for my birthday slumber party!" she turned to El then. "It's so cool that our b-days are right next to each other's!" she exclaimed.

"Only the girls, right?" insisted Hop for probably the 5th time. "I know your parents aren't in town yet."

Lexi looked very innocent with those big green eyes of hers.

"You have my word, Chief," she said. "No boys allowed."

El looked back at Mike, who was on the couch talking to Dustin's brother, not really understanding it. Lexi had said that everyone was invited to her house. *Everyone*. Will had confirmed his presence right when they arrived, for example. Will, who never went anywhere. And Jennifer's smug smile was making El even more confused.

"But…" she started, and Lexi took her hand very suddenly.

"Did you pack your things already, Ellie?" she cut really fast, dragging El to her bedroom. "Let's see," Lexi went about Eleven's room as soon as they crossed the curtain. There wasn't a door in her room.

"You told me the boys would go," El said still confused, and Lexi hummed. "And now you told Hop that they won't. What's the truth?"

"The truth?" echoed Lexi, picking up the dress that she had given to Eleven from the bed. It was red and short, probably mid-thigh, and it had details in black. Someone had called it 'Rock 'n Roll' earlier. "The truth is that you will look so good in this tonight, and it will work perfectly with those boots Nancy gave you."

She threw the dress inside a bag, and then started to check El's make up products. She didn't have much, just a lipstick, some gloss and some blush. Eleven wasn't satisfied with her answer, though.

"Friends…" she started, fingers laced nervously. Lexi looked at her. "Friends don't lie."

The small Latina raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, to each other. But are you friends with your *dad*?"

She guessed so. And she didn't understand why Lexi seemed so grossed out about it. For over a year Hopper had been El's only contact with this world, and she liked to think of him as a friend.

"Look," said Lexi patiently. "Things are different with our parents, you know that." She didn't. "Nothing big will happen, it's just a slumber

party, friends having fun together. And since the boys are *your* friends, and I have *my* friends, why can't they go too?" Lexi put a hand on El's arm. She had a good point. "Besides, you sleep at Mike's all the time. It's not like something major is gonna happen."

A few major things happened, though. First, El didn't understand why she needed to be all dressed up to stay at home, but Jenny and Lexi kept talking about a "make over" so she rolled with it. They complained about how her underwear didn't match, which was something El didn't know was supposed to happen, and had her wear the dress with the boots, and it looked awesome. They braided her hair in two French braids and applied some make up on her, with red lipstick on her lips. It was a very different experience from that time the boys had to make her look 'normal'. A while later, people started to arrive.

The thing about Lexi Solaris, according to Dustin, was that she was one of the popular girls, which meant that she was in a powerful status during middle school. Since there was no gymnastics program in Hawkins High, she'd probably try out for the cheerleadering squad, which apparently was the top of the school chain. The thing about her, Dustin said, was that she wanted to have connections beforehand, just to make sure. And the best way to have connections was throwing a party.

Her party had to be very low key, though. Lexi's parents, like Dustin's, were at some church camp event, and she had just come back from gymnastics camp a couple of days ago. Her older cousin, who was a Senior, was staying with her, and helped her plan everything. Mr. and Mrs. Solaris would be back on the 3rd, so she needed backup to help her clean the mess.

"If this goes south," said Will at the door taking in the amount of people in the living room. "We are going to Dustin's."

"Deal," they all said at the same time, including El who had previously crossed her heart to Hop that she would *stay* at Lexi's. Things *did* work different with parents, she was learning fast.

Lexi's house was back to back with Dustin's, and right in front of a square where all those people flooded to at some point of the night. If

El said that the party wasn't cool, she would be lying. It certainly was interesting. For an excruciatingly long time, they watched Jenny try to convince Will to dance with her, and even though they were quite the pair at the Spring Ball, now he was clearly avoiding her.

"What in the fuck?" asked Lucas when she finally gave up and left.

They were all sitting in the living room with different levels of boredom on their faces. They had red cups with bitter drinks in their hands that El didn't like, but Lucas was handling it just fine, and Mike sipped every now and then. Will, sprawled on one of the couches, didn't answer, but El, who was sharing the loveseat with Mike, knew what the problem was: Will didn't like Jenny, and he had realized it just recently; not in the "I can't stand her" way of not liking her, because she was a good friend, but in a "this is not going to work out" way. It just wouldn't. And the problem was that Jenny didn't share that opinion. But it wasn't El's secret to tell.

So instead of nosing in, El was playing with a coin she had found, making it flow between her fingers. Mike held her wrist with gentle fingers.

"You can't do that in real life either," he said in her ear, and she let the coin drop on her stomach, offended. She was practically lying on his lap, feet over the arm of the loveseat. El looked up at Mike. "No one is prepared for how extraordinary you are," he told her, and it was similar to something her Papa said to her once, but sounded way more understandable coming from him.

"But you are," she said. "You've always been."

"This is painful," interrupted Lexi appearing out of nowhere, and maybe she wasn't talking about them, but they wouldn't know. "You guys are having fun?" she asked, really excited. They doubted it looked like they were having a good time, but well. "Look who is finally here!"

She made a large gesture, and then Oksana appeared. She was wearing a yellow floral dress, her blonde curly hair loose on her shoulders and down her back, and she smiled when she saw them, waving a hello. Dustin sat up straighter.

"I thought you were packing," he said, and she blushed.

"I still have a couple of days," she said. "Can we talk?"

Among 'uhs' and giggles, Dustin got up. Turned out that the whole 4th of July plan worked perfectly for him, or maybe Oksana really liked him, because that kiss happened. In fact, many kisses happened for Dustin the past month, as they tried their best to make a good use of the time they still had together. He followed her, and Lexi smiled as if she had just accomplished something before she turned to go do something else. Two seconds later, Will got up too.

"Where are you going?" asked Mike confused.

"I'm *bored*," said Will. "There must be something interesting to do around here."

So he went, and no one bothered to go after him. Lucas, Mike and El stayed put for almost an hour after that, but then a group of drunk jocks invaded the living room, so they decided to go outside to the square. Since it was late there wasn't any loud music, just loud chatter, and a whole lot of people they didn't know. El recognized a few faces from the Spring Ball, but most people were from high school.

"Hey, Midnight!" They heard someone call, and Troy made his way towards them with his minions trailing behind him. He had learned not to bully the boys the hard way, but old habits were hard to break. "You let Byers steal your girl like that?"

"What are you talking about?" Lucas frowned, and El looked from him to Troy, who was laughing.

"Oh, man, then he's going behind your back! It just gets better. Those Byers really know how to steal other people's ladies!"

"Troy," Mike started cautiously. "What the fuck are you *talking* about?"

Troy smiled, and right after that the second major thing of the day happened.

"Lexi," he and El said at the same time.

"*What?*" exclaimed Lucas, turning to Eleven.

"They're near the pool," continued Troy. Lucas looked at him then, making a face. "You lost."

"Why don't you just go mind your own business?" interrupted El, suddenly feeling very protective over Will. She might be smaller then all of them, but Troy did not forget what she could do, so he chose the wise move and backed off, still casting one last laugh in Lucas direction.

"Lexi is sucking face with *Will*?" exclaimed Lucas, more surprised than hurt. He turned to Eleven. "You knew about this?"

"Just figured," she told him. "Now everything makes sense."

The boys nodded. And then Mike looked at her.

"Everything *what*?" he asked genuinely surprised.

That day had become a life lesson for El. Weren't friends supposed to tell each other everything? She had noticed plenty of gray areas in friendship, but some things were just too complex for her to grasp so fast. She couldn't afford to explain all the details, right?

"Oh, Mike," El said instead with a half smile. They would have to continue that another day.

"That's mental," Lucas shook his head, and then he looked around. The crowd was finally thinning. "Speaking of, *where the hell is Dustin*?"

Nowhere to be found, it seemed.

El and Mike shared Lexi's bed that night for the first time. It felt all right. They were so exhausted that they didn't even change into other clothes, just took off their shoes. Eleven slept like a baby. Sort of. Lucas's snores woke her up every couple of hours, but it was okay. He slept in the bunk bed that El was supposed to share with Jenny, if that night had gone the way she told Hop it would go. Jennifer was on the couch downstairs, and there were other people too, friends of

Lexi that El had no contact with.

It was a warm night and a hot morning, but that didn't stop Eleven from feeling good with Mike's arm around her and his chest pressed against her back. She woke up early and fine; the sun was peaking through the window, and she turned around carefully to keep from waking up Mike right away.

El got up, jumped over Lucas, and looked through the window while she unbraided her hair. Lexi's window had a view to the back yard, and the pool looked particularly interesting that morning.

Smiling, she went back to the bed and gently shook Mike.

"Mike," El called. "*Mike*."

He grunted and tried to roll to the other side, but she held his arm and insisted until he opened his eyes.

"What time is it?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

"Don't know," answered El. "It's not important. Come on, Mike."

"I'm sleeping," he complained, and even pouted.

"No! Get up," she tickled him, and he sat up right away, holding her wrists and laughing.

"Okay, okay!" Mike said, remembering right in time to keep his voice low. The house was silent. He looked at El and it didn't even seem like she had just woken up with her pretty Mona Lisa smile and her fingers reaching for his shirt.

"Good morning, Mike," said El in that calm, soothing tone of hers, and he let go of her wrists, his hands dropped to his lap before he could do something sudden so early.

"Good morning, El," he answered.

"Can you two fuckers chat somewhere else?" complained Lucas throwing a pillow at them. He missed by good three feet, but delivered the message. Eleven got up.

"Come," she called, and left the room barefooted and all.

Mike followed her down the stairs and out to the backyard; he watched her take a deep breath, yawn and stretch, and that dress was really short. El got closer to the pool and tested the temperature with a foot. She looked back at Mike.

"How terribly cold is it?" he asked.

"Quite," she answered. "But it's a warm morning."

He was going to ask '*so what*', but before he could open his mouth, El was taking off her dress unceremoniously. Her boyshort panty was pink, and her bra was red like her dress, they didn't really match.

"Cute," he said getting closer, and she smiled.

"I know, and really comfy!" she told him. "Nancy had a lot of underwear opinion to give."

"Please, don't put my sister and underwear in the same sentence," Mike practically pleaded, and El shrugged. She eyed him up and down.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked, and he frowned. El smiled. "Come on, Mike, it's just a swim. Why not?"

Mike bit his lip, considering it, and then-

"What the hell," he said, already taking off his shirt. El's smile grew, and next thing, before he even unzipped his jeans, she jumped in the pool. He joined her, and the water was cold, but not as cold as he expected.

El had learned how to swim pretty fast since she started to live with Hopper. She asked him to teach her as soon as the weather began to warm up, and it was a good thing that they had a lake in their backyard, she could practice all the time. Besides, if she was used to the temperature of the lake, no pool would be a problem. Her favorite parts about the water were diving and floating. They tried to keep quiet to not wake everyone up, and mostly, Mike and El just talked and made out.

Mid-way through a kiss, though, Eleven stopped. Mike waited, and then he opened his eyes, facing a very concentrated El.

"What's up?" He asked, and her attention snapped back to him. El smiled.

"Dustin wants to talk to us," she said, and Mike's eyebrows went up.

"You can *tell*?"

She nodded, and right after that Dustin crossed the back fence practically strutting, a smug smile on his face. El and Mike swam to the pool's border.

"Is that a cigar?" asked Mike frowning, and Dustin's smile grew. He saw Eleven's disapproving stare then, and threw the cigar on the ground.

"It tastes like shit, actually," he said, stepping on it. "Where's everyone else?"

They woke Lucas up under protests, and then all four of them went looking for Will. It took a while, but they found him sandwiched between Lexi and a guy called Marvin, who was a sophomore, in Lexi's parents' bed.

"Is that what Lexi wanted for her birthday?" whispered Dustin. "A *ménage à trois*?"

El frowned. Ménage what?

"I thought Marvin was gay," replied Mike in the same whispered tone. "At least that's what Nancy said."

Lucas eyes widened.

"Maybe," he said. "This is *Will's* threesome."

What?

"It's not," El said, even though she didn't understand what they were talking about. "I think," and to cut that discussion short, she stepped

inside the room and poked Will's leg.

The five friends went downstairs and out through the front door. It was mid-morning on a Friday, but the square in front of Lexi's house was practically empty, so they all sat on a merry-go-round. Mike and El's clothes were wet, because they didn't even dry after getting out of the pool, and Lucas was extremely sleepy, but Dustin seemed to have something really important to say, so they made the sacrifice.

"Did you have a threesome with Lexi and Marvin?" Lucas asked Will, who laughed.

"No," he answered. He sounded like that would be some absurd idea. "Two cheerleaders are a bit too much."

"Good," said Dustin. "Because today, it's about *me*."

"Where were you the whole night?" asked Mike. "We couldn't find you anywhere."

"Uh, didn't you see where I came from this morning?" replied Dustin. "I was in *my* house, in *my* bed."

He paused, and they waited. El leaned on Mike, head turned to Dustin to see what he had to tell them. Lucas had a raised eyebrow, and Will just observed.

"Is that it?" asked Lucas. "You want to brag about sleeping in your own bed when we had to improvise at Lexi's?"

"No," answered Dustin, the smugness back in his posture. "I want to brag about the lots of sex I had."

"WHAT?" All the boys exclaimed in different levels of surprise or shock, but El just looked from one to another, an increasing frown on her face.

"You're lying," attested Mike.

"I'm not."

"Who would have sex with you?" replied Lucas.

"First of all, rude," said Dustin. "Second of all, Oksana did!"

"You had sex with a hot girl?" exclaimed Will, more impressed than anything.

"I can't believe you got laid," Lucas shook his head. "*Before high school*!"

"What-" started El quite timidly, and the boys looked at her. "What is ... 'getting laid'?"

"You don't know what 'getting laid' is?" said Dustin at the same time Will said- "It's sex," with that same 'this is obvious' tone, suddenly forgetting that there was nothing obvious with Eleven.

"Guys," Mike tried to interrupt, but they saw how she was repeating the word, how confused she looked, and the eyes turned to *him*.

"Mike," said Dustin. "You're a really shitty boyfriend."

How was that Mike's fault? El looked up at him and he was totally blushing. Whenever he blushed, his freckles highlighted and she found that so cute.

"*Guys*," he insisted, his voice catching. "You know how it works with El, and we're too young anyway!"

"Well, I'm not," bragged Dustin, and Mike rolled his eyes. Eleven still didn't understand, but she wouldn't insist. Someone would explain it to her soon anyway.

"Okay, we get it," said Lucas. They were quiet for a couple of seconds. "Now, will you give us the details or not?"

He did. Plenty. And El sat there nodding and smiling in the right moments, the way she had learned to, but wasn't it true that she could tune people out? She caught something about American memories, and last goodbyes, but she didn't listen to half of what Dustin had to say.

All of that seemed like really important information to have *before* going to high school, so maybe she should do some research, but the

past twenty-four hours had been an overdose of information and she felt mentally exhausted by now. Soon, Lexi and her cousin would wake up and they'd have to help them clean, so there were other things occupying El's mind at the moment.

"Look at El, she's not even paying attention anymore," said Lucas. The boys were laughing about something, and she wasn't. She lost her cue.

"I bet she's wondering who could explain this whole sex thing for her," added Dustin. "Aren't you?"

El hummed, unsure of what to say.

"Don't ask my mom," said Will. "She gave me the Talk and it was super awkward."

"And don't ask Hopper!" exclaimed Mike, some concern in his voice.

"Why not?" asked El. She couldn't tell Hop about Lexi's party, couldn't ask him about sex... why was it so restricted?

"Uh, I like to live!" Mike replied, and the boys laughed. "And I know for a fact that the first thing he'll think is that this whole subject came from *me* when I'm completely innocent."

"Why would he assume that?" El wondered out loud, and the boys looked at her.

"Oh, El," Mike said with a small smile. They would have to continue that another day. "Just don't ask Hop, okay?"

She nodded. What else could she do?

A/N: Out of options, especially when Nancy was so busy getting her things ready for college and working, El decided that it would be a good idea to ask Mrs. Wheeler about the Talk. No need to say that Karen dropped her coffee, breaking her husband's favorite mug in the process. But she gave the Talk, alright. For Eleven.

And for Mike. Again. (he wanted to DIE) You can't bee too careful.

(Added to Joyce's talk at the beginning of the year, and Nancy's half-ass explanation about the Madonna song, things were getting clearer for El. El didn't understand ~everything~ yet. But give her time, guys, she's only 14.)

9. September

Author's note: This day is a patience test, guys, I swear to God!

I'm not here to talk about my internet frustations, so, well. What's up, everyone? Here's the longest chapter you'll get. I'm serious, I don't think there will be another chapter long as this one is. I hope you all enjoy and review at the end!

September

The first time it happened, it was Labor Day. El had gone with the boys and Bark, the dog, to the National Park. The place was packed with people with their dogs and bikes and kids. Hop had to work, because he was a cop, and El promised she'd behave.

But then she got distracted, and it may or may not have had something to do with a series of bets between Lucas and Mike, and when she least expected, Bark got loose from her and ran after something.

"BARK, NO!" El called, immediately running after him. The boys dropped everything to go after her. That dog was Hopper's baby, almost. "BARK, COME BACK! STOP!"

He was fast, and she was losing track of him. The boys were circling to try and trap him.

"He's going to the bike path!" shouted Dustin.

They didn't see the group of cyclists coming. They didn't plan the best way to approach. All Eleven wanted was for Bark to stop. So she commanded him.

"Bark, stop!" and he did, right on the track. But the cyclists didn't. El and the boys were close, but not close enough. "NO!"

Most cyclists managed to diverge, except for one. Bark was hit. He cried out, and so did El as she closed the space between them. Bark tried to get up, but he couldn't. All the cyclists stopped to try and

help, both their friend and the dog.

"Oh, my God," the cyclist said, getting up from where he had fallen. "Is he okay? I'm so sorry, he came out of nowhere."

"You hurt my dog!" exclaimed El, caressing Bark's fur. She was borderline sobbing, with him crying on her legs.

"El, it was an accident," reasoned Mike. "Breathe."

"I'm sorry, Bark…" she said, kissing the top of his head. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have let you go."

"El-" Mike touched her shoulder, but she shrugged him off.

"No, you don't understand," she said. Because she had a bad track record with animals, they usually never liked her. No one but Bark. He adored her, and trusted in her, and she failed him. "I was supposed to take care of him. My dad will be so angry."

"He won't," said Will sympathetically.

"Look," the cyclist said. He was kneeling in front of her, and El had to look through her tears to see him. "It's just a broken leg. My car is right outside; I can take you guys to a vet. I'll pay."

Eleven blinked and sniffed.

"You'd do that?" she asked, and he nodded. Then she looked at the boys, and they nodded.

Dustin and Mike carried Bark, and El followed between Will and Lucas, all trailing behind the cyclist guy. He had scratched his arms with the fall, but seemed okay, and he had a Range Rover that fit everyone of their little group. El, Mike, Lucas and Will rode in the back seat, and she cried a little harder whenever Bark cried from the pain. *If only she could take away his pain.*

"There's isn't any vet open in Hawkins," said the cyclist. "The nearest one is in the city. Don't you want to stop somewhere to call your parents?"

"Can you stop at the police station?" requested Eleven, and the cyclist looked at her through the rearview mirror.

"Her dad works there," explained Dustin in the passenger seat, and the guy nodded. They were close to the station, and it only took five minutes to get there.

As soon as the car stopped, El hopped out of the car and practically ran to the front door. Mike went after her, the boys commented something about her being hysterical. He had never seen her break down like that, and he was beginning to worry.

"Dad?" She called, passing by Flo. "Daddy?"

"El, you need to calm down," Mike tried to reason as Eleven headed to the Chief's office. "He's gonna be fine, it's not a big deal."

"Mike," El stopped in her tracks and turned around to face him. "Can you *please* shut the fuck up?"

Well, that was unexpected. Mike's eyes widened at the same time the door to Hopper's office opened. He seemed both parts confused and angry about the scene in front of him, and as soon as Eleven saw him, she started sobbing.

"What the hell is going on?" He demanded, unable to understand what she was saying, and Mike sort of shrugged. He sort of didn't know exactly what he was doing.

"I'm sorry, daddy, I'm sorry, I messed up," El kept saying between hiccups, and Hopper looked at Mike again.

"Sorry for what?" He asked, hands on El's shoulders.

"Bark!" She exclaimed. "I said I'd take care of him and you trusted me, but he got hurt and it's my fault because I told him to stop and they ran over him, and-"

"He just broke a leg," Mike hurried to explain. Hop looked at Eleven again, kneeling to look up at her face better.

"I disappointed you, daddy, I'm so sorry," she kept saying, and then it

hit them.

Eleven had been punished her whole life when she did something against what the adults in her life told her to do. She was used to being locked up or deprived from whatever mild good thing she had if she didn't do exactly what she was told to do. And she was told by Hopper to take care of Bark.

"El," said Hopper with the most soothing tone he could manage, one hand caressing her hair. "Baby girl, look at me." She did, still hiccupping. She looked like a mess, and now he understood it. "I'm not mad at you, okay? I'm not."

"But I-" she tried to say, but he cut her off.

"No. Come here," he got up and led her to his office, where he sat her down on a chair. Mike followed and got her a glass of water. "I don't want the details right now, just tell me this: is Bark alive?" El nodded. "Are you fine?" She nodded again. "Bark broke a leg, is that it?"

"The cyclist that ran over him offered to take us to the vet, he's gonna pay for the treatment," Mike informed. "He's right outside, with the guys."

Hopper nodded, his eyes never leaving El.

"See? It's all right, Ellie. It's alright. It was an accident, and you can't control those. Not even *you*," he touched the tip of her red nose. She was pouting.

"That sucks," said El.

"I agree, but it happens," Hop nodded, and she wiped some of the tears with the back of her hands. "Now, here's what I'm gonna do," he got up, caught his hat from his table. "I'm gonna call the day off, because I need to have a chat with this cyclist that is taking my kid and my dog for a walk. And I'm gonna go to the city with you all. And then, when Bark has a cast, and we're back home, I'll call for a pizza, what do you think? So we can eat our feelings. Is that good?"

El sniffed, and then she nodded. That sounded good. And she was getting calmer.

She got up too, and Hop let the kids leave first.

"Is everything okay, little Hopper?" Asked Flo sympathetically, and El nodded a bit sadly.

"It's Bark, he got hurt," she explained.

"But he's gonna be all right," Hop said, coming after her.

Mike and El went back out, and Hopper stayed a couple of minutes more to organize the rest of the group. He also had to compose himself some. It was the first time El called him dad so unceremoniously, not out of explaining what dynamic they had, but genuinely coming to him because he was her father. He had signed those papers six months ago, but now? Now they were real.

The next day was also the first day of school, and even though Lexi and Jenny had told her that it was important to make a good first impression, Eleven couldn't care less. She put on the first pair of jeans, shirt and boots that she found, drank her coffee with only one cube of sugar and let Hop drive her to school.

"Why do you smell like Bark?" asked Will, who was going with them.

"He slept in my bed and now everything has his scent," she explained, sipping her coffee. "And fur."

"I told you to let him on the sofa," said Jim, eyes on the road.

"Not gonna happen," replied El right away, and Hop kind of rolled his eyes and kind of smiled. That damn kid.

They had decided that the best option was to have at least one of the boys with El in every class, so she'd always have a familiar face around. That way, she had English with all of them, Algebra and Spanish with Dustin, Biology with Will and Mike, social studies with Lucas and she was also put – against her will - in arts (with Will; Mike was enrolled in music) and PE. Hopper had tried his best to take her out of at least PE, but the subject was mandatory for three of the four years of high school, and she'd be stuck with it anyway.

"Your locker is near mine," said Mike, checking their schedule sheets

as they made their way through the corridors. "You think you're going to be alright in PE?" he asked. "The girls are separated from the boys for most of the year."

"Yeah, Jim gave me the talk," El answered stopping in front of her locker. She already knew the combination, but it wasn't like she needed to know it. She could open every single locker in this school, if she decided. Mike frowned. "You know? The '*please, try not to kill anyone*' talk?"

"Oh," said Mike, and he even chuckled a little. "Anger issues."

"Principal said that '*sports would help*'," she continued while deciding what would stay in her bag and what would go into the locker. El shrugged. "I don't know, I felt pretty intense watching football with Hop. BUT," she was quick to add. "At least the girls will be with me, right? Even if Jen is still mad at Lexi. It's a distraction."

Mike opened his mouth to say something, but he was interrupted by static and an announcement. The sudden voice made Eleven turn and look around and up with wide, confused eyes.

"*Good morning, Hawkins High students, here's your counselor Mr. Fresno,*" the voice said excitedly. "*We are in for a great year, guys, can't you feel it?*"

"*Greg, could you just tell them what to do?*" someone else said over him. Mike laughed, bringing El's attention to him. The other boys and Lexi were coming in their direction.

"*Okay!*" continued Mr. Fresno with the exact same excitement. "*Please, everyone, direct to the auditorium. The first assembly starts in fifteen minutes.*"

"Is this when they are going to tell us about the class tournament?" Lucas wondered. El closed her locker and Mike made a face.

"I really hope they drop that damn tournament, I don't think I can take an overdose of PE right in the first week," he complained, and Lexi scoffed.

"Good luck with that," she said, and they all headed to said

auditorium.

It already was half-full when they arrived, but they somehow managed to find seats all next to each other more or less in the back. When Jennifer showed up, she made a big show of sitting on the complete opposite of Lexi and Will, which put her next to Dustin even though they hardly ever talked, so El, who was between Will and Mike, could only greet her with a wave of her hand.

"Hey, nice shirt!" Dustin finally noticed. He had no trouble being loud. Eleven smiled and showed off a bit.

"Did you see?" she said. It was one of the *Star Trek* shirts he had given to her. On her birthday, Dustin had said that he couldn't choose between the two, so he bought both. This one was plain black with the spaceship on the front.

"Attention, please," some teacher said into the microphone on the stage. "Everyone, take a seat, let's begin."

"Look, Preston is looking at us," Lexi whispered to Will, but El heard anyway. She turned to pay attention. Lexi was waving.

"She's not," replied Will looking over to his right, and El followed his eyes. A few lines ahead, there was a group of girls looking directly at them. The brunette in the middle was saying something to a redhead. El had seen them at the party, she guessed. Will held Lexi's hand, making her drop it. "Don't."

"You think she remembers me?" Lexi asked, still staring. Preston and the redhead weren't looking at her though, and it made El frown. They were all grinning, as if they just heard the best joke. The teacher on the stage was still trying to catch everyone's attention.

Will smiled instead of answering, and looked at El, who raised an eyebrow. Another teacher (or at least she guessed was a teacher) offered to take the mic, and as soon as he had it, people started to cat call him.

"What's going on?" she asked Mike.

"They think he's good looking," he explained. "Don't you?"

Eleven looked at him. He surely was the youngest person in that group of teachers; a guy with a beard as blonde as his hair and a charming smile.

"I guess," she said.

"He looks like a hippie," Lucas commented.

"Come on, guys," the teacher said, blushing even.

"You're too distracting, Mr. Fresno!" said Preston, and everyone laughed. So *he* was Mr. Fresno? Not a teacher, then. Okay.

"Now *that*, Ms. Telles, is harassment," he said, pointing at her. Preston didn't even seem bothered. "Good morning everyone, aren't we excited to be back?!"

He greeted the freshmen and talked and talked about the school's rules, and about extra-classes and clubs, and the Homecoming that'd be held on Friday after the tournament, which got Mike groaning with displeasure, his head down.

"We are so fucked," said Dustin. "And it's only the first week."

The classes tournament was described as an "ice breaker". Every class they were supposed to have in the afternoons for the rest of the week would be replaced with sports. The four years would be organized, which with a couple of teachers to guide them and divide the teams, and they would play in several sports. First round: everyone against everyone; win a game, you gain 3 points, lose a game, you gain 1 point, in case of tie, 2 points to each team. Second round: the two teams with more points go head to head for first place, that'd grant them 5 points. At the end of the week, the students of the year with the most points would get a 30% discount in the school's store for the rest of the semester and tickets for the first basketball game of the season in the city.

"Why would we want tickets for a basketball game?" said Will, and Lucas looked over at him.

"Uh, I want tickets!" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, but the city's team sucks," reasoned Jennifer.

"I want the store discount, though," said Will.

"You do realize that to get all of this you have to play sports, right?" interrupted Mike. El shrugged.

"It could be worse," she said, and he looked at her absolutely flabbergasted.

"*It could be worse?*" he echoed. Their hushed chatter didn't make much difference among everyone's chatter. The older students were very loud. "I know you developed a taste for football and soccer because of Hop, but do you really think this is a good idea? El, you go *psycho* when you're angry."

She pouted a little. El knew how worried Hop was with her having to take PE, and she knew that she was a bit of a time bomb sometimes, but who's to guarantee that sports would trigger her? Sure, watching football was a mind exercise. Okay, she did break half of the TVs in the restaurant they went to watch the Super Bowl, so nervous she was, but that was *ages* ago. She was better now.

"I didn't say it was a good idea," she pointed out.

They would have said more, but Mr. Fresno finally managed to make them pay attention to him again. Well, everyone but Eleven, who turned to Will.

"Will," she called. "Who's the redhead who keeps looking at us?"

"You think she's looking at us too?" he asked, and El glared at him. She didn't *think*, she *knew*. The girl was looking *right now*.

"That's Peyton," Will decided to explain. "She's part of the P squad."

"P squad?" She echoed, and he nodded.

"Yeah. They are Juniors now, and every girl of their group has a P name," he said. "Preston is the leader, Peyton is her second," he was pointing them subtly as he named them. "Patty, Pauline, Polly and Phyllis close the list. Half of them are cheerleaders."

They lost the moment Mr. Fresno dismissed everyone, so suddenly there was movement all around and their chat was cut short. The assembly took the time of a whole first class, so next up El had Spanish with Dustin.

"Hop on, Hopper," Dustin said as soon as they were in the corridors. Mike had to go to the opposite direction of them. "You're with me."

El grinned, and accepted the offer of a piggyback ride to class. She had a million reasons to love the boys to death, but sometimes she thought that Dustin was ahead of all of them, just because he was so funny and such a sweetheart. His friendship levels were out of this world.

School started to get really weird before lunch, when El and the boys were looking for Mike. Not that he had disappeared, he was right where he said he would be waiting for them, but because that redhead Peyton was talking to him. The scene was wrong on many levels, from how he was basically flinching every time she got too close, to how she smiled and touched his arm.

Eleven walked ahead of them, but was cautious to approach, and when Mike saw her, his face read a clear "SAVE ME."

"Where did you learn to play that well?" asked Peyton.

"Uh, I practice a lot," answered Mike, and then he turned to El. "Hey, have you met Elle?"

Peyton looked her over.

"The Chief's daughter, I heard about you," she said. Funny. El had never heard of Peyton. "I was just saying that I saw *Mike* here playing the guitar, and he's really good, isn't he?"

El didn't like the way she said Mike's name. She sounded poisonous, and it made the girl frown.

"I know," she answered. She looked at Mike waiting for his approval so she could do something about Peyton and he shook his head just slightly.

"Are you trying out for the school band?" asked Peyton, still too close, still too touchy. El had no idea why it was making her so angry. She was aware of the others near them, but her focus was all on Peyton's body language. "You *have* to, Mike-"

"Okay," said El, done really quick. "You need to step back."

Someone breathed an "*Oh!*", and Peyton looked over at El with disdain. She was almost a head taller, but it wasn't easy to intimidate Eleven.

"Excuse me," she said, not moving one bit. "What did you say?"

"I said," repeated El, taking Peyton's wrist and making her let go of Mike. "Back the fuck off."

The air went still, and she heard someone say '*Oh, she made El swear*', but she was too busy stepping between Peyton and Mike. She did acknowledge Mike's hand on her waist though, and the gesture was surprisingly calming.

"Careful, little girl," said Peyton. "You don't want to cross me."

El smiled. She had grown up with people way worse than high school mega bitches; she had faced real, actual monsters. Did that Peyton chick really think that she could scare her?

"Are you trying to intimidate me?" El asked. "Because it's not gonna work."

Before Peyton could say anything else, someone called her. Preston and the other Ps. She eyed El up and down one more time, and all the kids didn't breathe.

"You better watch your back, Ellie," said Peyton, and then she looked at Mike. "See you around, kid."

She pointed at something on El's shirt, and El looked down, just to be hit in the nose. It was the oldest trick in the book, Jim had said to her, and one he liked to use on her, because she always fell for it, but Jim was her dad, and Peyton-

Peyton backed off laughing and the only thing that kept El from jumping on her face was Mike's arm around her waist.

"What the fuck," she exclaimed. Joyce always side-eyed El whenever she swore, but that was way healthier than blowing someone's eye sockets, right? Besides, most of her vocabulary was influenced by the boys and Hop.

"Careful, Ellie," said Lexi. "Your eyes look a little green."

Lexi didn't make sense.

"Relax, El, it's just a prank," Mike told her. "Nancy told me that this could happen. Every year, they choose a freshman to try and make fun of."

"That's mean," El said thinking about it. "But why you?"

"Peyton's sister, Carol," explained Lexi. "She had beef with Nancy."

El needed to take a few deep breaths to completely calm down, and Mike held her hand.

"Who does she even think she is?" she asked when they started to walk to the cafeteria. "It's not rhetorical, who the fuck is she?"

"Man, Ellie is a *savage*," Lexi commented walking behind the couple. "Where did you guys find her?"

"The woods near Will's house," Dustin answered right away, and Lucas elbowed him, so he changed the subject. "You think the P squad will really retaliate against El for her boldness?" Lexi chuckled. Definitely. "That's dangerous."

"How so?" she asked. Lexi could never understand why the boys were so careful around Elle. She knew that Troy was terrified of her, but he never explained why. Sure she was intimidating, but Elle was skinny and small, how could she cause so much fear?

"You have no idea," answered Will, and instead of afraid, he sounded impressed; admiring even.

The P squad did retaliate during the week. From stealing El's clothes while she was in the shower, to trying to trip her over in the cafeteria, and other, meaner things, but somehow El always ended on top and no one knew how. In part, her success was due to a tip from Lucas. He told her that even if it wasn't a good idea to get back at them physically, she still could get revenge attacking their material things, like their clothes and cars.

On Thursday, Patty pushed El in the mud during the cross-country run, but it so happened that the girl was on her period. By the time El got to the finish line, people were already starting to notice the red in Patty's running shorts. She didn't go to school for a week.

"That was *mean*," Dustin said on their way back that afternoon. "Your geniality is terrifying."

What they didn't realize on the next day, Homecoming day, was that someone had alerted the P squad about who was responsible for all of the weird things that had been happening to them, all the confusion and the embarrassment.

"If you plan on still making a move on Wheeler, don't," Troy told them first thing in the morning. "His girlfriend is a psycho, she's going to kill you all."

The Ps laughed in his face, which was something he was used to since 6th grade now. No one ever believed him right away.

"Wheeler is just a skinny nerd boy and Hopper's only leverage is being the Chief's daughter," said Preston. "What could she possibly do?"

"Look, I'm telling you from experience. I tried to cross Wheeler once, and she *ruined* me. She can make you do things. You better be careful around her."

So even though the Ps didn't exactly *believe* him, they kept an eye on El for the rest of the day, and by the time of the last field hockey game, women's Freshmen vs. Juniors, they decided to jump her in the first opportunity, and get her out of the game as soon as possible.

Besides, that Hopper girl was *good*. Before the first round games, they saw her observing the guys and trying to mimic their movements. She crushed it when she played and scored more points than any other student.

El was confident that all she needed to do was to get through this day. Later that night, she and her friends had decided not to go to Homecoming, and they would go to the movies instead. They hadn't watched *Teen Wolf* yet, and that was their chance of having the theater for themselves.

For the first time ever, the Freshmen were tied with the Seniors in the classes tournament, and that was mostly because the girls' performance was so good. They won almost every single collective sport and got second in every other individual category. They already had won field hockey against the Juniors a couple of days ago, all they had to do was to repeat their performance. Or so the excited math teacher, Ms. Malcolm, said in their pep talk.

It did look like they would repeat the Wednesday show for a good five minutes. El scored three goals, and assisted two others by Jenny. Things were fine. Until-

Until the ball was in her possession again, and when El looked up to decide her way to the goal, she saw a wall of Juniors coming in her direction. For several seconds, she panicked. She couldn't just *make* them part ways, it'd look too weird, let alone make them stop, that'd be worse. She couldn't dribble them. At least eight of their eleven players were coming in her direction, Peyton right in front of her. They would disarm her for sure, that was inevitable. El saw her teammates running to intercept the other players, but this was not football, they couldn't drop all of their defense.

She took a deep breath.

She faced them dribbling to the right, and she almost made it through, another step and she'd be able to pass the ball to Jenny, who was seriously the best hockey player El had seen, but Preston was there, and her hockey stick hit Eleven's right leg.

It hurt like a bitch, but it got worst. Despite the public's loud "*OH!*"

and the referee's whistle, El still was jumped by two Ps and another Junior and her vision went black. When she blinked, El was on the floor, both Lexi and Jenny over her, and their captain, a girl from the swimming team that Eleven had social studies with, was pushing Preston aside.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS YOUR DAMAGE, PRESTON?" she was screaming. El didn't even know her name, and she was defending her.

"Don't move!" warned Jenny, hands on El's shoulders. The referee, who was Ms. Franco, their PE teacher, had gotten closer. "You broke your leg, you passed out."

"What?" El exclaimed, brushing off Jenny's hand and sitting up anyway. Lexi helped her carefully. Her leg didn't look good.

"EL!" Mike called, making his way through the field. The boys were right behind him. The team was circling the Juniors and the referee. "El!"

Jenny gave him space, and he kneeled by Eleven's side, even if it meant that Jen had to stand next to Will for a while. El was a bit disoriented, but if that accident worked to make her friends talk to each other again, then at least there was that.

"They are calling the hospital already, okay?" Mike told her, sitting down and taking her hand. Incredibly enough, El wasn't crying. She was too hyped to cry. "It's close, so it will be fast, can you hold on?"

El looked at him, at the concern in his face. She didn't notice how heavy her breathing was, so she tried to breathe slower, and then she nodded. Mike smiled just slightly.

"I broke my arm once in 3rd grade, I fell off my bike," he told her. "They had to reset the bone, that was the worst part. But Will drew on my cast, and Nancy made this cheesy Star Wars cover for when I had to shower, so that was cool."

"I broke my ankle a couple of years ago during training," added Lexi. El knew what they were doing, trying to distract her. She was glad, it was working. "Hurt like a motherfucker, but I survived, and I'm back

better than ever."

"NO!" They heard Preston shout. "That's not fair!"

"ELIMINATED, Preston!" repeated Ms. Franco emphatically over the revolted Juniors. "All of your team's points removed, *ALL OF THEM*, because of your little stunt. You know that move is illegal, and *you broke another student's leg*!"

When she said that, Eleven drew in a breath. Her leg was starting to sting now that her body temperature was lowering. She could hear the sirens already. A teacher crouched in front of her.

"Your father is on his way, Elle, okay?" he informed her, and she nodded.

Mike wasn't just holding her hand anymore, he was holding *her*, as if he could predict her next move. She leaned against him.

"What are you still doing here, Telles?" asked Ms. Franco. Her face was red, she looked absolutely done. "I told you to go to the principal's office NOW!" she pointed towards the building, and Preston even started to fuss, but Polly or Pauline (El couldn't tell who was who, they looked the same) made her turn and leave. "Savannah, you go too. Tell him what happened again."

The captain of El's team went as well, but El had her eyes on Preston's back.

"I'm going to fucking demolish her," she said, and Mike's grip got a little tighter.

"El," said Lucas before anyone else. The paramedics were coming. "Don't. Remember to channel your pain and anger to something that can be satisfying, but won't get you in trouble."

She nodded.

"What's Preston's car again?"

Everyone looked to one another confused. The paramedic introduced herself, and told El that they had to reset the bone to immobilize the

leg. She asked for space, and just Mike stayed on the floor with Eleven.

"Her car," El insisted, and Jenny stuttered.

"Uh… the red convertible. The only one in the parking lot."

El nodded to her, and then she nodded to the paramedic.

"Okay, Elle," said the paramedic. El let go of Mike and palmed the floor. "On the count of three."

"Two, actually," Mike whispered to El. "You can't scream."

She nodded. She knew.

"One."

El locked her jaw, held her breath, closed her eyes, sharpened her mind, focused.

"Two."

Snap.

Just like that.

The whole school shook as a wave of energy rolled under their feet, making many of them lose their balance or shout half panicked, half surprised. El breathed out. And then she passed out for good.

When El came back, they already were putting her on a stretcher and Hop was worried and sick around her. She touched his arm, and when he looked at her, she saw that he was really close to crying.

"It's just a broken leg, dad," El said. Her voice was smaller than she expected, but okay. Jim smiled, and when he did that, he really cried.

"Who did this to you, baby?" he asked. "I'm gonna sue their asses."

El chuckled, and then she shook her head.

"Don't worry, I've got this."

That night, for the second time in a week, the Hoppers sat in the living room with a massive pizza between them, El's leg propped on the coffee table, Bark with his own little cast by her side. They had broken the exact same leg in the exact same way. Jenny called it "twinning" which was funny.

Despite the bother, overall El was fine. She wouldn't watch *Teen Wolf* with the others, but Jenny was talking to Will and Lexi again, and Mike came over too, earlier. It could be worse.

She was fine.

A/N: Second week of high school, Ms. Franco, the PE teacher, passed that damn sex ed video everyone hates. You know which one. Lexi joked about how concentrated El looked, as if she was actually paying attention to that crap. (side note: she really was. that thing was really educative) Sometimes, it even looked like she would ask a question or something.

When the class ended, El got her crutches and looked for Mike as soon as possible and as fast as she could. When she found him, she only told him one thing: *Just had a sex-ed class. I got it. Mike, I got it*.

I mean, finaly, right?

PS: The dog and owner breaking a bone happened to my brother and our dog about 7 years ago. She was hit and broke her front leg, and on the same week my brother fell playing soccer, broke his arm in the exact same place our dog had.

10. October

Author's note: Hey guys, howdy?

I'm sorry it took a little longer for this chapter to come, it's just that my internet still isn't working properly. I have bad news, though. I've two exams this week, so it'll take a little longer for the last couple of chapters to be written/published. I won't abandon the fic, though! I'm writing every time I can, but please understand that I really need to study. I know, it sucks, but obligations, man. :(

But look, it's October, so here it is, an October chapter! You know I couldn't let this be plain, so here's an unexpectedly long chapter. I've no idea how long the next couple of chapters will be, so enjoy!

And, you know, leave me a review at the end to help me make through this awful week :(

Have a nice chapter! x

October

It was Mrs. Wheeler's idea. She thought that maybe Ellie would like to spend the evening around the city getting candy, since Mike was responsible for taking Holly this year anyway. With Nancy in Maine, the trick or treat duty was all on him. El had been out of the cast and with this orthopedic boot for two weeks now, and even though her leg still hurt a little, she actually liked the idea.

"Well, I was planning to go to the Seniors' Halloween party," Will said when they were still deciding what to do. "They will have this haunted tour, and a costume contest and everything."

"I heard that the house they rented was part of an asylum," said Dustin, and Jennifer rolled her eyes.

It was lunch time, and their table was packed. In part it was because of Lexi, who did make it onto the cheerleadering squad, and in part it was because of El. Her excellence in sports got her a few admirers

who could not WAIT for her to recover, so she could play again, and the whole Ps situation turned her into a bit of a heroine. Now, everyone greeted her in corridors and she hardly had space with her friends.

Much like the boys, Eleven had no idea how to handle attention. No one taught her that part of high school life. Damn, she never thought she would be *noticed* in the first place. So with her sort of popularity they kept looking for a quiet place where they could sit and eat in peace, but there was always someone passing by and saying hello.

"It *wasn't*," Jennifer replied. Two years ago, when Will disappeared and then came back from the dead, the only contact the boys had with her was through the rare times Lexi had something to tell Lucas. Will had developed this quiet crush on her since 4th grade, but once he was back, they started to talk more. Now, with her and Lexi befriending El, and El and the boys being inseparable, they were all constantly together, even if the boys still were four big nerds, like Lexi liked to call them.

Dustin ignored her.

"It's a Senior Halloween party at a haunted house with gorgeous older girls in small costumes, Mike," he continued. "When would we ever have the chance to go to one of those? I mean, we just got invited this time because Lexi's cousin is helping organize the whole thing."

As if he had a chance at anything, but who was judging?

"Oh, don't be like that," Lexi pouted leaning back. "I'm a cheerleader now, I won't forget you guys."

Lucas just raised an eyebrow at her. El guessed that they knew each other really well, they didn't even need to use words, like she and Mike.

"Okay, I might only remember El and Jen," she admitted. "But they can pass down the word."

The boys shook their heads and El chuckled. Most of the time she couldn't comprehend *why* Lexi and Jenny did things the way they

did, like when they had a fight over Will and didn't talk for over a month, but in general they were really good friends.

"We can do both," Mike said. "Holly has to be home before 8, so we can take her, and then El and I go meet you guys for the party. It doesn't start before 10 anyway."

"Yeah, but Elle can't stand for too long," observed Jen. "How is she going to enjoy the party if her leg is tired?"

"Oh, I'll be fine," assured Eleven. She'd felt worse for the almost two months of itching casts and sort-of-showers. With the physiotherapy, she could actually walk now, and the doctor said that she was recovering miraculously fast, wasn't it great?

"So we are going?" asked Lexi just to make sure. They all nodded. "Okay, I will get the tickets with my cousin, then. When are we picking up the costumes? There will be a contest, remember?"

"We can go this Saturday," suggested Will.

"Count us out of the costumes plans," said Mike, and he quickly answered as soon as someone asked '*WHY?*' "We're trick or treating with Holly! You know how she gets on Halloween; she has everything figured out since June."

"Mike," reasoned Will. "Your sister is five. You will let a five year old pick your Halloween costume? And El's? For the Seniors' party?"

Mike nodded.

"You know Holly, we don't want another 1984," he said. El chuckled again.

"Holly is great," she said. The little girl *was* great.

Holly had made plans for Halloween a while ago, before Nancy left, and when the Wheelers told their little daughter that her big sis wouldn't come home for the holiday, at first she got sad, but then she saw Elle right across the table. Elle would have to do. So now there was a drawing on their fridge with all the specifications of this year's holiday, and Elle's name under one of the characters.

"How come you didn't pick *me* to be Wilma, Hol?" asked Mrs. Wheeler as she did the teen's hair. Holly was on El's lap.

"Because you already *are* my mom," she explained, checking the fake bone in her hair in the mirror. "And the whole point of Halloween is the make believe."

El was really enjoying that wave Mrs. Wheeler was doing with her bangs, and the white dress was cute too, with the white stone necklace and all. Holly had put *a lot* of thought into everything, and that was adorable. El herself had watched the cartoon only a few times, but she found it funny.

"Besides," continued Holly. "You're not the one who's taking me, *they are*. And we need to match."

"We don't '*need to*' anything," Mike said from the door, and they all turned to him. Eleven tried not to laugh. "You owe me *for life* Holly, I swear to God."

The little girl had the biggest of the smiles, and she jumped from El's lap. Holly was wearing a green top and blue booty shorts, her blonde hair was in a high ponytail secured by the fake bone. She looked cute. But Mike had an orange costume with this blue sort-of-tie, and it was in character, but really funny.

"You look great!" his baby sister exclaimed, and he rolled his eyes.

"You look just the part, Mike," agreed Mrs. Wheeler, which did not mean that he looked great. He looked at El, and she crossed her legs.

"Will you do it?" she asked, and he frowned.

"No!"

"Oh, come on, Mike!" protested El, and Holly was looking from her to Mike.

"No!"

"But Mike!" interfered Holly with those puppy blue eyes of hers.

"I said no," he repeated.

"Come on, Mike, just once?" asked Mrs. Wheeler, and he looked at her completely betrayed.

"*Traitor*," he whispered, and for several seconds the girls waited until he sighed. "Yabba-dabba-doo!" he exclaimed with a total of zero excitement, and Holly clapped her hands super satisfied while El laughed really hard.

"See?" said his mom, offering a hand to help El stand. "Not very hard to make people happy."

Despite himself, Mike smiled. When he looked at El again, she was waiting for him to say something, but somehow he was always at a loss for words with her. In that drawing that was on the fridge, Holly had even made El's cast, and she looked just like it, with the short white dress and the Wilma hairstyle, except she was a thousand times better.

"Hol, where's your bucket?" asked Mrs. Wheeler before Mike had a chance to say anything.

"Downstairs," she answered.

"Well, then go get it! It's almost time to go."

Holly ran out of the room and Mrs. Wheeler followed her, not without looking at the teens one more time. She looked pretty with her blue dress and blue bow, and Mr. Wheeler, in the living room, was looking funny with the brown costume of Barney Rubble.

El had never had Halloween before, not even in movies. Not until she came back and the boys bombed her with pop culture almost overwhelmingly. However, it had been baby Holly who taught her more about the holiday. Where to get the best candies, which costumes would be better, which houses to avoid, even if she was probably too old to go trick or treat anymore.

"What were you last year?" asked El. She had heard the story of how Hol had decided that Halloween was the best holiday ever, and how she protested until everyone in her family agreed to follow her

program, but they never told her the final result.

"*The Muppets*," Mike answered, and he offered her his arm. El took it gladly, and they headed downstairs. "I was Gonzo." El chuckled, and he just shook his head amused.

"Is that because of the…" she pointed to his face, making a circular gesture.

"The nose, yeah, that little savage. Are you sure you're okay to walk? You've never been trick or treating with Holly, she's intense."

El shrugged.

"I'm fine," she guaranteed. "I took a lot of painkillers."

But Eleven had no idea.

Mrs. Wheeler dropped them off in the furthest and richest neighborhood, and they started their crusade to get candy. Mike and Holly explained that there was no point in going to the houses with closed doors, because those people wouldn't give out candy anyway. In Hawkins, if you were giving candy, you'd stay out on the porch greeting the kids.

They hardly had any closed doors in that neighborhood. Holly had a lot to say about the candies in her pumpkin bucket, she had her own system when it came to organizing them – by how crunchy, or with more chocolate, and if they were sour or sugary. El was paying so much attention to that chat that she didn't even realize whose house was next.

"Uh, Hol…" Mike tried to stop his sister, but she was on her way up the front stairs.

"Oh, it's Pebbles!" a lady exclaimed. Her dark hair had white strikes all over, and she looked very elegant. She was wearing a loose pullover over a black collant and red high heels. "Look, Preston, isn't she lovely?"

"Hair color is wrong," Preston replied, looking bored and annoyed. "So is Wilma's."

Mike and El exchanged a look, and then looked at Preston again.

"We don't have any candy, Wheeler," she said. "Go back to the hole you came from."

"Preston!" protested the woman stepping ahead, and the P gestured to make her stop.

"I've got this, mom," she said, eyes on El. "I can't believe you had the nerve to come here, Hopper."

El raised an eyebrow watching Preston come down the porch slow and dramatically. She was wearing khaki pants, a buttoned shirt, a tiger jacket over everything and had a camera hanging on her neck. El didn't know what Preston was supposed to be, and she failed to see how she was to blame for being there. All she wanted was some candy for Hol.

"Why so?"

"You ruined my car," she spit out. "It was the most valuable thing I had, and you *ruined* it."

Eleven tilted her head.

"Me? Your car was swallowed by a sinkhole, from what I heard."

Preston stepped closer. She was holding a box of candies.

"You think you can fool me, *Ellie*? Troy told me about you, you freak. And *I know* that you're responsible for destroying my car. If you try something like that again-"

"What?" El stepped closer too. "What are you going to do? Break my other leg?" she tried really hard to stand tall like Nancy told her she should do, even being so small. "Lemme get this straight. If you really think I '*ruined*' your car, and that I'm a '*freak*' the way Troy says, then you know better than to try and cross me again. Quick tip: don't. Or I will *really* destroy you. Now," El fished one of the candy bars from Preston's box. "My boyfriend's sister came to get some candy, and according to her map you've got some of the best."

There was a moment of silence, except for the noise of El's candy wrapper being opened. Holly stood by her side.

"Besides," said the little girl. "I don't care I'm not a redhead like Pebbles. Last year, Mike's friend Lucas dressed as the Doctor, and it was the best costume ever! So he told me that it doesn't matter how you look like, you can be whoever you want."

"Yeah, whatever," said Preston dropping some candy in Holly's basket. "Get out of my face."

"Come on, El," said Mike, taking El's hand, and Holly's too. "We have a schedule to keep."

El let him guide her out of the Telles's lawn, enjoying her candy bar way too much.

"You're such a bad-butt, Elle!" Holly exclaimed, full of energy.

"And you know you'll have to lay low until she backs off, right?" added Mike, always looking out for her.

She held his hand a little tighter, and smiled at him, that El smile of hers.

"Yeah, I know," El said, a whole different attitude from just two minutes ago.

"How are you such a pro at this school bullshit, though?" he asked. Even during that week in 1983, when they had to sneak her into school, her level of sass and badassery was incredible.

"Nancy," El answered. "She sat with me before she left for college and said 'You know what's the only thing you gotta know about school? Take shit from *no one*.' So I don't. Didn't she tell you that?"

"Oh, she did," Mike said remembering. "It just doesn't work with me, but it's okay. You can be badass for both of us."

El liked his words very much. Mike was the nicest person she ever met. He let go of her hand and put his arm around her shoulders instead, and it felt good.

"I don't understand their costumes, though," she said, changing the subject completely.

"Oh," Mike smiled after the few seconds that took him to understand what she was talking about. "Preston's mom was the protagonist of *Flashdance*, and she… is a scream queen. I don't know which, but that's what Lexi said the Ps would go as."

"Scream queen?" echoed El. That was new.

"Yeah, it's a horror movie thing, sort of," he proceeded to explain, telling not only Eleven, but also an attentive Holly about those trash horror movies Lucas loved so much, and the ladies that made them so entertaining.

None of that was enough to distract El from the fact that they were walking *A LOT*. As they reached the neighborhoods around downtown, the number of closed doors increased, but soon they were walking among kids and parents again in the suburban area that indicated that the Wheelers' house was nearby. When they arrived at the Hendersons, Dustin was helping his mom hand out candy, and El found that the porch bench was way too inviting. She simply walked there and sat down, hardly greeting anyone.

"Uh, hi El," Dustin greeted, his attention divided between her and the bunch of kids asking for all that chocolate in his hands. "Everything okay?"

El forced a smile, but then she flinched when she moved her leg.

"Ellie?" called Holly, getting closer.

"I can't walk anymore, Hol," she admitted rubbing her right knee.

"But we are almost home, mom cooked dinner!" Holly said.

"I know, I know," El looked at Mike. "You guys go, I will stay here."

"But the food!" argued Holly.

"There's food here," interrupted Dustin. "She'll be fed."

"El," called Mike, and she looked at him. He wanted to convince her to walk a few blocks more, so they could all have dinner together and do all that they planned, but damn, he couldn't do that. "I'll be back soon, okay? And I'll bring some of my mom's pumpkin pie for you."

"Bring some for me too," said Dustin, but he was ignored.

Mike kneeled down in front of El, his hands held hers.

"I told you she was intense." He really did. El looked over at Holly, who was digging in her candy bucket. "I'll be back soon, okay? And I will bring some food and painkillers for you. How does that sound?"

El smiled, and then she leaned forward to kiss him.

"Good," she said.

Holly got closer, sort of breaking the moment, and then she dropped a lot of candies on Eleven's lap.

"One of each, because you're so cool," she said.

"Oh, thank you, Hol!" El exclaimed, picking a random candy. "Now I know I won't starve."

"I will see you later, right?" she asked, and El nodded.

"She's just going to rest a bit, Hol," Mike answered for her, getting up and resting a hand on the little girl's shoulder. Holly looked at El and up at her brother, and then she nodded.

"Okay then," she lamented. "Bye Ellie. Bye Dustin."

Baby Holly was guided by her brother back to the sidewalk and El observed them as she popped the candy that was in her hand into her mouth. Apple. Little bit sour. She wasn't sure she liked sour candies.

"Hey, I think we have some aspirin inside, you want some?" suggested Dustin, and El nodded. That would do for now.

He smiled, and offered her the box of candies he was handing over in case more kids showed up while he was inside. El eyed him up and

down.

"Marty McFly," she said. "Nice."

Dustin shrugged, satisfied with himself.

"Oh, El," he said at the door, one hand on his chest. "You make me so proud."

Mike came back almost two hours later, and El was feeling a lot better, though she didn't trust her leg yet to stand for too long. He brought half a pumpkin pie, caramel apples, chocolate and almond brownies, and even though the Hendersons already had offered El a lot of food (that she obviously accepted), she still ate a few bites of everything.

"Where does all of that go?" wondered Jennifer, watching El eat.

"High metabolism," answered El with her mouth full.

"No wonder you're one of the boys," said Lexi, even though she was eating her own massive slice of brownie. Jennifer looked at her, eyebrows raised. "What? I burn a lot of calories too!"

"Guys, we need to figure this out," said Will, bringing everyone back to the matter that had them in Dustin's room in the first place. "Are we going or not?"

"I can't walk anymore, guys, sorry," said Eleven leaning to her left against Mike. "Never underestimate Holly Wheeler."

"We can go to your house and get your crutches," offered Lucas, and El shook her head.

"Hop declared it '*date night*', since I wouldn't be home until tomorrow," Will said a loud *ew*, just for emphasis. "And if he sees that I need the crutches he sure as hell will call the night off."

They made faces and whined unhappily.

"Why is your room on the first floor?" Jenny asked Dustin looking out the window.

"We can still go, but I can't make the haunted tour," said Eleven.

"But that's the best part!" exclaimed Lucas.

"I don't mind," El guaranteed.

"It was the only room available when I was born," Dustin answered Jennifer, and she looked at him. "Try having three older brothers, and then you'll know."

"Your brothers left for college a decade ago," she replied. "Only Grant came back."

"Why is it bothering you, Jenny?" he inquired. "I like my downstairs room."

"*Okay!*" she replied, and then turned to everyone else. "How are we going to *get* there?"

Lexi shrugged.

"We take the bus," she said.

"The bus is on the road," interrupted Mike. "And to get to the road-"

"We have to walk," they all said at the same time. That broken leg was proving to be a great pain in the ass.

"I can drive you losers," someone said at the door. Grant, Dustin's brother.

Grant was 24, the second youngest of the Henderson brothers, and Hawkins Middle's newest art teacher. Dustin always said that he was born two decades too late, and El heard Lexi's cousin call him '*the definition of hot*'. She guessed it was true, with his curly blonde hair and the green eyes. Mostly, El thought that Dustin looked a lot like him.

"At least as many of you that fit in my car," he continued. He had a Chevy. El was pretty sure that everyone would fit in its trunk.

"And you would do it because…" questioned Dustin all suspicious.

"Because, little brother, your friend here already lost the Homecoming because of her leg, now she's almost losing another classic party because of it, how awful is that? I, the sympathetic and selfless person that I am, want to help."

"Paula is underage," said Dustin.

"Who?"

"Paula Solaris, Lexi's cousin," he repeated. "Underage."

Grant was silent for what felt like a long time, and then-

"You want the ride or not?"

They did. El and Will rode in the front, everyone else was in the back. They arrived a little after ten. The party was being held in one of those lonely mansions at the rim of Hawkins, standing eerie and tall down the road. There were spider webs and fake pumpkins in the trail that led to the front door, where Lexi handed them the seven tickets she had gotten. They got skeleton wristbands and were allowed to go inside, all the while with El leaning against Mike. The place already was packed, loud music on the first floor; the orange, purple and green adornments against the black walls were charming.

They moved past the crowd. Without a ticket, Grant couldn't go in, but he said he'd be back around 1 a.m. to get them.

In the back of the house, it was like a completely different party going on. Way darker and spookier, the empty pool had both Will and El stepping back. It looked an awful lot like the Upside-down. They looked at each other with frightened eyes, but then El felt Mike's arm around her waist, and Lucas put an arm on Will's shoulder reminding them that they were fine, and they weren't alone.

There was a bar inside the empty pool, and beach chairs all around, and beyond it started the haunted tour through tall grass and foggy trees.

"Do we do this now or do we do this after a couple of Bloody Marys?" asked Dustin. Jennifer scoffed.

"You think you can handle *two* Bloody Marys, Henderson?" she exclaimed. "Your nerd ass couldn't finish one cup of beer at Lexi's party."

The boys, all but Dustin, laughed. Lexi looked at El and it seemed like she was saying something, but El couldn't decipher what.

"I say we go now," said Lucas, before that discussion started.

"I guess I will see you, then," El said, waving a sort-of-goodbye.

"No, no, El, you're coming," insisted Will. "We'll help you."

"Mike can carry you, right?" suggested Lexi. "Piggyback ride?"

"Mike can't carry shit," answered Eleven, and Mike sighed.

"I really can't, though, not for long," he admitted.

"Not at all," corrected Lucas. "You are such a weakling, Mike, it's shameful."

"Jesus, *okay*!" exclaimed Dustin. "Come on, Hopper. I'll carry you."

Lexi scoffed.

"Maybe you should date Dustin instead, Ellie," she suggested.

"…No," the three of them – El, Mike and Dustin – said at the same time, not a desperate awkward answer, but more of an attested fact. Their synchronization was impressive.

They walked to the beginning of the tour, and only then El hopped on Dustin's back. He had always been the strongest of the boys, and funny thing was: he sucked at sports. Out of their group of nerds, only El and Lucas could be trusted to practice anything.

"Just don't drop me, okay?" El asked, and Dustin scoffed. "I heard that this tour would be really spooky."

"*Please*," he said. "I don't scare easy."

Literally three steps later someone jumped from a bush, making

Dustin jump back and let out a scream that was way too embarrassing for them to ever forget. He didn't drop El, but he did make everyone laugh, no one harder than Jennifer.

"It's not that funny," he mumbled composing himself.

"It really is," El disagreed.

What wasn't all that much was the haunted tour. After that first scare, the whole air changed and the group of friends couldn't take anything seriously anymore, and when they circled back towards the house, one of the "monsters" had crutches. Lexi saw an opportunity and took it.

"Hey, my friend could really use those!" she said, when the monster showed up.

'*Monster*' was a hell of an overstatement to the person dressed as some sort of zombie. The whole tour was very cheesy, actually, considering that most of those teens had faced a *demogorgon*.

In less than a minute, Lexi had convinced him to lend the crutches to El and she finally had some independence. Now walking between Mike and Lexi, El could enjoy the view and the feeling of that party. As cheesy as it might be, and even though the pool looked really creepy, Halloween was as fun as baby Holly told her it would be.

"Look at them," said Lexi, pointing to Dustin and Jennifer, who were walking ahead of them. The bickering between them was as intense as those between Dustin and Lucas. "They are totally going to bang."

"EW!" exclaimed Lucas at the same time Will said, "Wow, thanks for the visual."

Lexi raised her hands in surrender.

"I'm not saying it will be today, I'm just saying that it's gonna happen *for sure*."

"How do you always know everything, Lexi?" asked Mike, and she smiled.

"I guess that's my special talent," she shrugged.

They reached the end of the tour and were back at the pool. By the time they sat on its border, Dustin and Jennifer were coming with Paula, Lexi's cousin, all carrying red drinks for everyone.

"…around 1 a.m., is that right?" Paula was asking, and Dustin looked kind of bored as he confirmed.

"This one tastes better than the drinks at Lexi's," El confided to Mike, one of her hands on his shoulder in a half embrace. She noticed that he kept his hand on her waist whenever he could.

"Sweet," he said, and she agreed before she sipped again. Mike smiled when some of the drink trickled down her bottom lip. "There's some here," he pointed, and then managed to steal a kiss, making her giggle.

El looked at him with those big brown eyes of hers, cheeks flushed, happy smile. Her hair had came out of the bun, and the pretty wave was gone, her bangs falling back on her forehead, while Mike's hair, that he'd been styling up (Nancy called it 'the Mel Gibson hair'), was down too, much like when they met two years ago.

He was beautiful. She *felt* it. It didn't matter that he couldn't carry her, or that he couldn't kick a ball to save his life, or that the only reason they had girl friends now was because people wanted to know *her*, and the boys were a package deal. It didn't matter that he was a big nerd whose eyes lit up the first time they entered the biology lab. Mike Wheeler was beautiful. She would die for him.

"I'd die for you," she decided to say out loud, and he nodded. They didn't see the glance of the other girls when they heard what she said, and they didn't care.

"I know," he replied. After all, she did kill for him more than once, and they only knew each other for a week at the time. And she did almost die to save him. Them. Were they too young to say that they loved each other?

She held him by his blue tie, pulling him closer for another kiss.

Some of their drinks spilled on her white dress.

Maybe what they had was stronger, even. It certainly felt that way.

11. November

Author's note: Thank you all for the patience, my exams went okay, I think it's fine.

Here's another accidentally long chapter for you, and I'll let you know that it's quite different from the past chapters. I hope you like it anyway. I'm writing December and I hope to give you guys a good ending for this fic, because you all deserve it!

Have a nice chapter, and I hope you leave a review at the end :D

November

Eleven took a deep breath, and then another. No, not Eleven. Elle. She was getting used to it now. Elle. Not even Hop called her Eleven anymore; when he wanted to piss her off he'd call her Jane. She shouldn't be mad to be called that, but she also never connected with the name. She was El.

Elle.

Another deep breath, and then she felt a heavy hand on her shoulder. *Dad*, her mind went right away.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Hopper asked. Elle looked at him. He was *so* different from Papa, it was blatant. She nodded. "Are you ready?" he insisted. "We can come back another day."

Elle thought about it. Hop's work schedule was crazy, so they were doing it on a Wednesday afternoon. Road trip, family stuff. She didn't tell anyone but Mike where she'd be going. Maybe Joyce knew too, but not from her. It was only a matter of time until Will figured it out, because he was really good at paying attention to details. She thought about her friends' faces when she told them she wouldn't go to the movies that day with them, and how the girls looked at Hop's car suspiciously, and she remembered thinking that she shouldn't call it off one more time.

"I'm ready," El told Hop, and for a second it looked like *he* was the one who wasn't before he nodded and opened the door of the car.

The house looked lonely in that neighborhood, but as they stepped closer they could hear the sound of the TV playing some afternoon talk show or comedy, according to the recorded laughs.

El and Hop stood side by side at the front door. The girl's hand was itching for something to do, at the same time it didn't have the courage to do anything, and then she reached out for the door bell once, twice, and waited. *Three is a charm*, Mike had told her, so she hit it one more time. He liked odd numbers, Mike, kept saying that there was something about them. She didn't have a strong opinion about numbers, even though they had once been all she got.

The door opened and a woman peeked outside, a cigarette hanging from her mouth. Even with Hopper being a massive guy, her eyes went first to El, who tried to smile.

"I'm," started the girl, and she had to swallow first. Damn, that was hard. "I'm looking for Terry Ives."

The woman looked right at her. Becky Ives was her name. And then she finally looked at Hop. He smiled.

"Remember me?" he said, and she looked at Elle again before she nodded and stepped back, giving them space to get in. "Sorry to come without notifying you."

"Meh," she shrugged walking ahead of them. She passed by the living room and only stopped in the kitchen. "Wasn't doing anything important anyway."

Becky leaned against the sink and observed Hop and El in front of her, the cigarette burning between her fingers.

"I assume you believe she's Terry's girl," she finally said. "I mean, that's why you came here the last time, right?"

"I am," El replied. Her voice came out stronger than expected.

Becky scoffed.

"She is," Hop insisted. "They gave me all of her papers."

"Did you bring them?" Becky asked with a raised eyebrow. She wasn't buying it, but Hopper had alerted El that she was a skeptical person.

"No," admitted Hopper. They didn't think they would need them. Becky nodded.

"So all I have is your word?"

Hop sighed.

"Come on, Ms. Ives, look at her-" he started, but El cut him off.

"Could you just consider give us a chance?"

"Chance?" echoed Becky. "For what? You think you can come here fourteen years later, knock at our door and just be accepted in the family?"

"No, that's not what I want at all," El said patiently. "You see, I've been adopted by Hopper and I'm fine living with him. If you think it's best, we won't ever come back here. I don't want to mess your life up, but I want to meet her, get to know her."

Becky looked uncomfortable. She lit another cigarette with the butt of the first one; her fingers were shaking a little.

"I won't even tell her who I am," continued El. "I just want to… talk."

"*Talk*?" replied Becky, and El nodded.

"Talk. And if you agree, I'd come back every now and then, keep her company for a couple of hours or however long you decide I can stay," she looked up at Hop and he nodded just once, the incentive she needed. "I want to know her, she's my mother. Just give this one chance."

Two minutes after, Elle was walking into the living room, her fingers fumbling with the tips of her hair. It had gotten really long now, almost past her waist, and she'd have to cut it again soon, because it grew heavy and straight and boring. Two minutes was all that took

her to convince Becky, and the time of that talk show was all that she'd have, so El decided to make the best of it.

Terry looked at her, empty eyes that barely acknowledged her. El dropped her hands and smiled.

"Hi," she said. "Can I sit here and watch some TV with you? I really like that show."

Elle waited for an answer that didn't come. Instead, Terry looked at the TV again, so El sat down, keeping a little bit of distance, careful not to enter in her space. They were going to the commercial.

"When I go help Mike take care of Holly, we like to watch it," continued El, trying to get comfortable on the old sofa. "It's funny."

Terry didn't ask who Mike or Holly were. She didn't say anything.

"I'm Elle, by the way," she said, last thing, and then she was quiet, reacting and laughing at the TV show only, and observing with her peripheral vision how the woman reacted too.

They didn't chat. They just sat there watching TV together for the 23 minutes of program that still was available. Elle had watched that episode before, but it still was funny. It was nice.

"Ready to go, baby girl?" Hopper asked as soon as the show was over, and Elle nodded. It was better to do whatever Becky determined, because she knew what was best for Terry.

"You have our number now," Becky told them. "And I have yours, I will let you know if you should come back. Understand?"

Elle nodded again.

"Okay," she answered, hands in the pockets of her jacket that wasn't even hers, it was Mike's. She borrowed it from him last time she stayed at his place less than a week ago, after the Halloween party, and didn't give it back yet. "Goodbye, Ms. Terry."

Elle waved her goodbye to Terry, who just looked at her, and then she turned to Becky.

"Thank you, Ms. Becky," El said offering her hand, and Becky shook it.

"Don't get your hopes up, kid," she said, her voice controlled. "Even if you really are the baby she said she had, Terry is long gone."

It seemed true, and sad. That night, Elle sat in front of the mirror for a long time; it looked like she was brushing her hair, but in fact she was studying herself, trying to find the similarities and differences between her and the woman who gave birth to her, trying to figure out how Papa decided that it was a good idea to let Terry go taken for crazy and keep El for himself. Jane turned into lab rat number 011, sounded like quite the environment to grow up in, right?

She could see it – the small nose, the pouty lips, and the brown hair -, the similarities were there. Did she make something fly when she was a baby? Did she force someone to do what she wanted before she could even hold things properly?

"You okay, Ellie?" asked Hopper standing by the door, and El looked at him through the mirror. She smiled.

"I think I want to cut my hair," she said. Just a bit. Long like this it was too much trouble to take care of, her hair had the annoying habit of knotting up really fast.

"Okay," he said. "I will give you the money and you can go downtown with your friends to do that."

El nodded, and he stepped back.

"Good night, kid," he said.

"Good night," she replied putting the hairbrush down, and then she turned around. "Dad?" El called. Hop looked at her. "Thanks."

Becky called less than 24 hours later saying that Elle could go regularly visit Terry. Apparently, her sister's mood improved a little when she had different company, so they set these 'meetings' to every four days. Sometimes, Hop would drive El, sometimes she'd take the bus, but the thing was: she never missed a day, even with her leg still healing, the physiotherapy and the doctor appointments. Elle made it

happen.

Second time she went there, she brought some of the papers too. Becky met El at the bus station, drove her to the house and the biggest difference was that Terry was standing when they got there, watering the plants by the window. There was a little bit of warmth in her eyes too, something that made her look almost happy.

"Hello, Ms. Terry," El greeted when she arrived.

Terry didn't say anything at first, but her eyes went to El's hair and she stepped closer, reached to touch it.

"Pretty," she said, and El couldn't help but be thrown back to a couple of years ago. Her hair was much shorter, just a couple inches down her shoulders, and the hairstylist had done something that made it have a lot of volume. It wasn't exactly how it looked like when she left the salon last Thursday, but Jenny had taught her a few tricks for the perfect hair.

"You like it?" El asked. "The other haircut was boring me."

Elle gave the envelope with the papers to Becky, and then went stay with Terry. They all had lunch together, but no one was much of a talker, so it ran pretty much in silence. Food was good. Company wasn't overwhelming. Felt nice. An hour after that, Ellie was leaving.

"Goodbye, Ms. Terry," she said at the door. "See you soon."

In the car, being driven back to the bus station, Becky gave her back the envelope.

"So you've been living with that cop Hopper since January, and was adopted in March, huh?" she said. Something about how she put the words together didn't sound like a question. "Why did it take you so long to come here?"

"I wasn't ready," El answered. Honesty would be the best approach with Becky, even though it wasn't exactly what she was doing with Terry. "And I needed to be sure of my actions."

"That's wise," she replied. "But if they knew…" Becky paused, eyes on

the road. "If they knew that you were Jane, and they knew that we were here, why didn't they bring you to us?"

Elle shrugged, avoiding eye contact too.

"I was instructed to look for Hopper when I decided to come back, they said they'd give me space. And then, in my first week back, Hop told me about you. I didn't want to come at first. When they offered the adoption, you weren't even an option; it was either Hopper or Joyce, or the system. I hate the system, those government fuckers would just be looking for a chance to get their hands on me again. And I love Hop, he took care of me even before I came back. He feels safe. So I chose him."

El hardly put so many words together in one go like that, but the situation demanded explanations she *could* give. She had learned, in her first English essay, that words are meant to be used. Sometimes they *have* to be used. She was learning that. Becky was silent then, and she only talked again when they arrived at the bus station.

"I'm glad you decided to come, Elle," said the woman. "You make me understand my sister again."

So maybe it wasn't about Terry feeling better that Becky let El come back. Maybe it was for her. El couldn't blame her, *wouldn't* blame her. She had finally gone there for her own selfish reasons as well, and everyone was winning, it seemed. So that was good.

"See you Wednesday?" asked El, and surprisingly, Becky smiled.

"Wednesday it is."

Four days later, Mike met El in front of her locker to walk her to the parking lot. She still hadn't told everyone where she'd been going, he was the only one who knew.

"Do we have any idea of what to do for Lucas's birthday?" she asked. They were holding hands.

"Lexi is trying to convince him, but he doesn't want anything big."

El scoffed. Lexi never did anything small, she liked to say that she

already was tiny enough for everything else. That's why she was a gymnast, and a cheerleader.

"I will need help with the English essay," El commented as they stepped outside. Hop's car was nowhere to be found. "I don't understand what the teacher wants me to do."

"Sure, give me the notes and I will see where's the trouble," Mike agreed, and stopped to wait for her to get the material. "Are you really going to your mom's today?" Distracted with getting her notebook from her backpack, El just nodded, and Mike opened his bag too. "Okay, then I have something for you."

"*Only* because I'm going to my mom's?" she asked looking up at Mike, and he smiled.

"No," he answered taking the notebook she was offering to him. "But I think she might like it. You know how our pumpkin garden gave way too much pumpkin? My mom is kind of freaking out with what to do with all of it, so…"

He got a heavy medium paper bag from his backpack and El felt immediately excited. Mrs. Wheeler was hands down the best cook she ever met since Benny, so anything she made was good.

"Spiced chocolate and pumpkin cookies," he said, putting the bag on El's excited hands. She opened it right away, and the smell of chocolate and spices hit her instantaneously, making her mouth water. "They smell really good, my bag was killing me the whole morning."

El chose a random cookie and took a bite of happiness. *So. Good.*

"Oh, God," she said, mouth full. "Yes."

"Taste is really good too," Mike said chuckling, and she offered him the other half of her cookie. Sometimes he forgot how delicious things were until he saw El have a bite of it.

"You are," said El closing the bag and putting it in her backpack. "The best boyfriend ever."

Mike smiled and she got on her tiptoes to kiss him.

"*Get a room*!" they heard Will shout, so just to retaliate, what was meant to be a peck of lips became a full on French kiss.

"OI! Michael!" said Hop hitting the honk. "Get your hands off my daughter!"

El smiled when Mike raised his hands surrendering, but she still didn't completely resume her kissing. Hop still had to honk a few times before she stopped.

"*Fine*," El said stepping back. "Dads are no fun," she complained, but it was more of a joke. Hop had been awesome. "I better go. Thanks for the cookies."

"It's nothing," Mike dismissed, making her roll her eyes.

"I'll call you later, okay?" she said opening the passenger door, and he nodded.

At the Ives's household, El had more than cookies to give to the sisters. She also had a homemade card (even though she still disliked making cards).

"We are having a Thanksgiving meal at the Byers' on the 28th," said El, giving the card to Becky before she sat by Terry's side. "Dad and I will prepare the turkey, and Jonathan will be back from New York, he's like a big brother to me. We are all basically family, the Hoppers and the Byers," she looked at Hop, who smiled. "We'd like to have you two there, too."

Becky looked from El to Terry, and then to the card in her hands. Elle had this round handwriting that was almost child-like. The card had a map and information about how to get to the Byers', as well as when to arrive and which dishes they could bring.

"Will made the map," said El. "He's-"

"The kid we were looking for when Joyce and I ended up at your door that time," completed Hopper. "We found him."

"I saw on the news," replied Becky.

"He's like a brother too, and he helps me with art," she continued, even though that information wasn't relevant. All the girls' small talk must be influencing her. "Would you… at least think about it?"

Becky made no promises, and every other time El went back there, she didn't mention Thanksgiving except for the week of the holiday, when they had to change their visiting day, because she'd have to be home and help with the turkey.

She had no idea if the women would show up, but when the day came, and Will was telling El all about Thanksgiving, Bark and Molly sleeping by their feet, there was another knock on the door. It was too early for it to be one of their friends, so El ran to the front door before Jonathan could, and opened it to find the Ives sisters standing there, a large dish in Terry's hands.

"You came!" the girl exclaimed, and gave them space to get in. It was really cold outside. "Welcome to the Byers', this is Will and my dog Bark, Molly is theirs, and Jonathan-"

"Hello," Jonathan greeted awkwardly, standing on the corridor. "Let me help you with that."

He took the dish from Terry, and she suddenly didn't know what to do with her hands.

"You can put your jackets by the door," continued El, and the women complied. Jonathan had disappeared to the kitchen, and half a minute later Joyce and Hop showed up.

"Hi! I'm so glad you came!" greeted Joyce warmly.

For the first time, El saw Terry smile. It happened during the meal, when everyone was saying what they were thankful for. Will had told her that that was the whole point of Thanksgiving: to reflect about the year they had, and be thankful for all that happened. Now, not *everything* had Elle feeling gratitude, she still had that damn healing bone, and English had been quite the challenge, but overall…

"This is nice," said El on her turn. "I'm home, and I've a family now.

It's not always easy, but it's nice. I'm thankful."

Because yes, sometimes she did have nightmares, and sometimes she still had to leave the light on, or the door ajar, and sometimes she snapped or panicked, but now… now the people around her really cared about her. Not in a "you are a precious creature" kind of care that she received at the labs. This was *real*. This was actual love. It overtook everything else.

After lunch, El got an extra piece of apple pie and cream and offered it to Terry, sitting by the woman's side.

"Thanks," Terry said. She wasn't much of a talker, just like El, but she had been talking more each time they met. She was glaring at El during the whole time she'd been there. The girl didn't mind. "Jane."

El looked up at Terry then, wide eyed, and the woman reached out and touched her face.

"The eyes," she explained, and El breathed. She guessed that she couldn't underestimate the woman who had been looking for her for fourteen years.

"I don't go by Jane, though, never did," said El quietly. "I was just Eleven until I broke out and the boys found me. Until Mike gave me a name."

"Elle," said Terry, and El nodded. "Elle Hopper."

"That came after, a few months ago. Mike just called me El, and I liked it. So I chose it."

She cut a piece of her pie, but didn't eat it.

"I'm sorry I didn't choose the name you gave to me," continued El. "I just…"

"Couldn't relate?" asked Terry, and El nodded.

"But I know you now, and we can be closer, if you want-"

"Elle," Terry interrupted making the girl close her mouth. "I

understand."

Elle smiled.

"You do?"

Terry nodded.

"Who's Mike?" she asked instead. Despite everything, El blushed.

"My boyfriend," she answered with a shy smile.

"Oh, a *boyfriend*," Terry seemed interested. "Is he good?"

"Yes," El answered right away. "Best person I know. He'll come later, if you stay a little longer maybe you'll meet him."

"Meet who?" asked Hop passing by them and sitting on the couch in front of them with his own piece of pie.

"Mike," answered El, and Hopper scoffed.

"You don't like him," stated Terry, even more interested. She still looked pale and fragile, but that specific afternoon she looked excitedly alive.

"Don't mind him, he's just being a baby," said El, dismissing Hop with a shrug. Instead of feeling offended, Hopper laughed.

"I kinda am, ain't I?" he joked. "What a crazy concept, being worried about my daughter and her boyfriend."

Terry laughed, and the sound surprised everyone. El finally ate her pie. Terry asked questions, Jim answered. Jonathan took pictures and put a record to play, even though Jim's condition to spend the holiday at Joyce's was that they let him watch the game.

When El went back to the kitchen to help with the dishes, Becky was there alone. As soon as the girl stepped into the room, she was hugged by the woman, and it only took her a second to realize that Becky was crying.

"Thank you," Becky was saying. "You fixed her. Thank you."

Elle doubted that she was responsible for fixing anyone, but she couldn't deny that every time she met Terry, even if all she did was to sit together to watch TV, or to do her hair, or finish her homework while Terry observed the plants, the woman looked better, *seemed* better. Damn, El herself felt better every time, as if Terry was the only person capable of truly understanding her.

"I thank you, Ms. Becky," El started, and the woman let go of her shaking her head.

"*Aunt* Becky," she corrected. "Okay? Aunt Becky."

"Aunt Becky," echoed El. "Okay."

12. December

Author's note: Wow. Can you believe that this is actually over? It just passed by so fast, a whole year! I think this is the fastest I've ever written, maybe?

Thank you all SO MUCH for making this journey with me, and making it special and interesting. For the reviews and the MPs and the kudos, favoriting and all those things you do in fanfiction sites and stuff. You all are the real MVPs, for realz.

A special thanks, also to my beta **Jenna** (littlecajunlady88) for giving me an insight of the American life in a small town and making this fic less sucky. Couldn't do it without you!

Now, enough blabbing, and let's go to the chapter, shall we?

PS: I apologize in advance for the attempt at writing slam and composing. That's totally my father and brother's territory and my poems skills are not really good, so... Sorry '-'

December

"Why do white people *do* that?" wondered Lucas, arms crossed.

"What?" asked Lexi by his side. "Dance?"

"Yeah."

"That's a really good question," said Savannah by his other side and Will chuckled, almost chocking on his beverage.

Winter formal. Freshmen weren't supposed to go, but the Freshmen won the classes tournament and the school decided to reward the best players with a pair of tickets each. That left half of their group with tickets – Lucas and the three girls. And that had everyone going to it.

"This is painful," said Lexi. Because it really was, all those whites trying to dance to Run-D.M.C. as if the songs were meant for them.

"I'm sensing that this is the judgment corner," Jennifer said after she left the dance floor with the others. El was particularly enjoying all that hip hop that the DJ was playing. "Why the faces?"

"Because having to watch you guys dance is an actual torture, that's why," explained Lucas.

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Dustin.

"No, it's serious," added Lexi. "You dance to this shit as if you're from some kind of ghetto. *You're from Hawkins, Indiana*!"

Distracted, El just kept singing the lyrics, kind of in her own world.

"*If you really think about it times aren't that bad, the one that flexes with successes will make you glad-*"

"Elle, sweetheart," Savannah interrupted, resting a hand on El's shoulder. "You're too white to sing that. Or any rap, really."

"Why?" asked El, looking at Mike. He shrugged.

"Because no one will buy that you're some sort of gangster, you're not convincing. And you're white."

El looked for Mike again.

"I don't know what 'gangster' is," she said.

"Is she for real?" asked Lexi.

"And how is my skin color an issue?"

"*Is she for real*?" wondered Savannah, genuinely shocked.

Lucas sighed.

"Unfortunately, yes," he said. "Look, El, you and I are gonna have some extra history studies, huh? Cultural appropriation."

"Okay," El said slowly. "But look, what I'm saying is that rap is angry, and I understand anger. *I like it.*"

They were all silent for a moment, the music and crowd loud around them.

"Right, that makes sense," Lucas agreed. "But try not to be hood about it, okay?"

"Because everyone can rap!" Dustin exclaimed, getting a bunch of 'NO!'s in return. "Yes, everyone. Even Mike."

Typical Dustin, passing the hot seat to someone else.

"Uh, no, I don't." replied Mike.

"You write all those songs for El," pondered Will.

"And your slam poetry is really good," El observed, taking his hand.

"None of those things are like rap," he said, as if it was obvious, and Lucas hummed.

"They kind of are, actually," said Lucas.

"I'm not a singer," Mike exclaimed. "When I write, I write for El to sing!"

El smiled, all melted inside.

"One does not sing in rap, Mike," Lexi explained. "One *raps* in rap. Damn, white people. You're right, you can't do it."

"Look, we're just having fun, okay?" Jennifer interfered. "Isn't it what music is about?"

The three people of color of their group whined and shrugged and crossed arms, things like '*I guess*', and '*Sometimes*' among their mumbled words.

"Then let's go have fun, you idiots," Dustin said right when LL Cool J's '*I can't live without my radio*' started to play. Their faces lit up, and he took Jennifer's hand, dragging her back to the dance floor. "Come on, Lucas! I bet I can out dance you in this!"

Lucas breathed in dead offended, and El and Will looked at each other.

"Oh boy, this is going to be *good*," said Will, and even though he didn't like rap all that much (maybe not at all), he followed everyone to see that battle.

After a couple of songs, El took Mike's hand and they went outside. She needed a little bit of silence for a change, and outside, with the snow falling would be just perfect.

They stepped out in the parking lot and El looked up, tongue out to catch the falling snowflakes like Joyce had taught her. She felt happy. Mike, still holding her hand, felt the same. A snowflake fell on her tongue making her laugh, and she looked at Mike with a big smile. Gosh, she was beautiful. How did he get that lucky?

"You know, you really could emcee," El said out of the blue, and Mike looked down shaking his head. "Think about it."

"El, slam poetry is just poetry," he said, looking up at her. "And I don't want to invade a space that is not mine."

"Music is music, Mike," she insisted, and he shook his head.

"It's not that simple," Mike said. "Remind me to go in more details later, okay?"

El thought about it, and then nodded. There still was so much about the world that she had to learn, and it was a relief to know that she had Mike, her friends, and Hop to make things clearer.

Mike pulled El closer. Her orthopedic boot days were almost over, but she was rocking it anyway, as usual. She was wearing all black that night – black tights, black long-sleeved dress, her Ramones jacket and the boot Nancy had given to her for her birthday - her hair loose down her shoulders and back. She accepted his embrace, her arms around his waist under his jacket, head resting on his shoulder. Her hair smelled really nice.

"*She's like floral in a winter night, light and color under the moonlight, warm flavor on my tongue, it's such a delight, I look at her, it's like there's*

nothing else in my mind."

El smiled without looking up at him. Oh, Mike. So much talent in just one boy.

"*He's got that fire in his eyes I can't explain, as if he could take away all of my pain, heart of gold like a genie out of its cage, now my heart is his as if he put it in chains.*"

Mike laughed, and only then El looked up. She wasn't lying, it *was* like he knew exactly what to do to bring her down to earth, to give her some direction. He grounded her. And she didn't know what would be of her without him.

"It's true," confessed El looking in his eyes.

"So was what I said," Mike told her, and she nodded.

"I know."

Snow rested on their hair, slowly melting because of their body heat as they stayed in the open for ten minutes, and then thirty, and then another twenty more swaying to the faint sound of the music in the gym. They only stopped when the light and honk of Joyce's car arrived, telling them that it was time to go home.

The only ones who stayed for longer were Lexi, Jennifer and Dustin, who depended on Paula's ride, but they all said goodbye knowing that they'd see each other soon at the Wheelers' Christmas party.

Elle's last day with the boot was December 23rd, and she still had to adapt to using her two feet again, much like Bark, who even though was cast-less for over a month, still was walking funny, as if he'd forgotten that his leg wasn't immobilized anymore.

She went shopping with Hop in the city, which was practical because he didn't like to waste time spending money. They also had the same vision of what a Christmas present should be like, so they saved a lot of time. Also, there wasn't much left to buy because it was literally the day before Christmas Eve, and every shop was packed.

"We are terrible planners," Hop commented when they were waiting

in the line, two carts of gifts in front of them. "We are doing this different next year."

"Lucas said that he has everything bought and wrapped since Black Friday," El replied.

"Wise," Hop nodded.

"Dustin said that it was bullshit to buy everyone gifts so early, but he and Lucas are always looking for reasons to bicker, so…"

"Ugh," groaned Hop. "Why are you even friends with these boys? Don't you have your own set of girl friends to spend time with now?"

"I'm not leaving the boys, Dad," Elle stated. "I can have both boy and girl friends."

They made one last stop at a bookstore, and then headed home to wrap the presents and rest. Nancy was home from college already, and she had told El that the Wheelers' Christmas party was usually really cool and energetic, so they'd have to build the stamina for the night.

They wore their best clothes, which meant that they weren't very remarkable, but Hop made sure to state that they weren't going to no red carpet, so they could wear whatever they wanted. El had him buying a cook book, and she prepared a whole batch of Madeleines with black and white chocolate toppings for dessert.

"Hello, Mrs. Wheeler," El greeted as soon as the woman opened the door, and Karen smiled.

"How long will it take for her to call me Karen?" she asked not Elle, but Hopper, who was standing behind her, and he shrugged.

"Go figure this kid," he answered, and she looked at El.

"It feels kinda wrong," said the girl, and Karen dismissed it with a gesture.

"Come on in you two," she said instead, giving them space to get in.

Elle went straight to the kitchen, where Nancy was helping put everything together. The whole house smelled amazing. She put the dish with her Madeleines on a free space.

"Do you need help?" asked El, and Nancy shook her head smiling.

"Nah, it's fine," she answered getting closer to greet El with a couple of kisses on the cheeks, which was unusual in Indiana but, she explained, quite common in college. "I want to know what you brought, though?"

El lifted the lid and Nancy stole a Madeleine for herself.

"Mike is in the basement," she said, mouth full. El raised an eyebrow. "In case you're wondering."

She actually *was* wondering, and it still was surprising how most people could read what was in her mind. And to think that *she* was considered the freak.

"Go," insisted Nancy. "We'll call in case we need help."

El still saw and greeted Holly and Mr. Wheeler before she headed to the basement. She already could hear the sound of Mike's guitar from the corridor. He was playing something different from his usual songs, which got her curiosity up. When she went down the stairs, she saw him on the sofa, feet on the coffee table, guitar on his lap and a pencil between his teeth as he played. Mike smiled when he saw El.

She didn't say anything, just stepped closer, and he stopped playing to write something on his notepad. Three phrases, and then he was playing again.

"You remember that song I showed you a couple of weeks ago?" he asked over the sound of the guitar. "The one you liked the chorus?" El nodded. "Sing the hook for me?"

El cleared her throat as she tried to remember how the hook was. The song he had shown her had a different beat from the one he was playing now, so she'd have to adapt.

"Okay," said El, and she waited for his nod to start. "*So high we fly, we touch the sky, for there is nothing in the world but you and I. So high we fly, on clouds we lie, I'm feeling so complete when you are by my side-*"

"*She's like floral in a winter night, light and color under the moonlight, warm flavor on my tongue, it's such a delight, I look at her, it's like there's nothing else in my mind. Don't get it twisted, switched, 'cause here's what I say, since we met it's like my head is up in flames. Upside-down life in a sec, straight to the cliff ahead. I can't count how many times she saved me from my death. Special won't to describe the way she moves, she shook my world, she shook my life to the point of no return. She had to leave, but she came back, and here is the thing: now that she's back with me I'm capable of anything-*"

Mike pointed at El, who despite smiling like crazy was able to get back right on cue.

"*So high we fly, we touch the sky, for there is nothing in the world but you and I. So high we fly, on clouds we lie, I'm feeling so complete when you are by my side*."

Elle seriously couldn't stop smiling.

"You rapped," she said in wonder, sitting by his side.

"Well, it's just you and me," Mike confessed. "Don't tell Lucas I dared."

She chuckled, and then made the gesture of zipping her lips.

"It's brilliant, really," El told him. "But you gotta start giving me more than songs as presents."

Mike shook his head.

"Who said this song was your present, silly?" he replied.

Not to get it wrong, El loved Mike's songs, she knew all of them by heart, but even Nancy had mentioned how a girl should have material things.

"I got you something too, but only after midnight, right?" she said, and he nodded. Mike usually did this thing where he'd start playing

without even noticing, which was so enchanting and lovely. El knew the song he was playing now, *Baby it's cold outside*, from the radio.

They didn't know how long they spent just sitting there looking at each other, no chat, no kissing, just the guitar, the looks and the company. *Clear head like the middle-July sky, mint smelled like the fresh start that comes by* – Mike thought, and maybe he should write this down, but he couldn't stop looking at her, he just couldn't, and she just couldn't either. He changed the song he was playing to *Can't take my eyes off you*, and El started to giggle, quickly followed by him.

"Everyone decent down there?" they heard Dustin call, making then giggle even more.

"Yeah, very decent!" Mike answered, and only then the boys came down the stairs.

"We never know, with how easily El takes her clothes off in front of people," Lucas commented, and Dustin gestured as if taking off his shirt.

El and Mike exchanged a look. They would never forget that, would they? Mike just shook his head.

She still didn't mind being stuck with those nerds. Life was good.